

MARY ANNETTE "ANN" WRIGHT

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: I'm interviewing Ann Wright. Do you have a middle initial that you use or not?

WRIGHT: Well, my given name is Mary Annette Wright but I've always gone by Ann Wright.

Q: Alright. Ann, let's start kind of at the beginning. When and where were you born?

WRIGHT: I was born in Durant, Oklahoma on July 22, 1946.

Q: Can you tell me something first about your father, the background, going back a distance? His name was?

WRIGHT: His name was John D. Wright. He was born in a little town in Oklahoma also, called Adair, Oklahomup in the northeast corner of the state. In high school my father and his brothers played football. He and his brothers were big and tough. According to an aunt, the other football teams in the area knew not to mess with the Wright brothers. My aunt said that if the brothers didn't get into a fight while at school each day, then they would fight each other on the way home from school. After graduating from high school, he worked in small banks in Oklahoma. He joined the Army Air Corps during World War II and served in the Pacific. His best stories were about serving with General MacArthur. He brought back some pig tusks from some where in the Pacific and some U.S. dollars that had "HAWAII" printed on them. He said he won the dollars in a poker game in Hawaii. After the war he sold automobiles with an uncle in Winfield, Kansas. Several years later we moved to Southwest City, Missouri where he headed the bank. In 1954 he was named the President of the Bank of Bentonville, Arkansas. We moved to Arkansas when I was eight.

Q: Do you know anything about the Wright background, where they came from?

WRIGHT: A little bit. I'm sad to say not as much as I should know and want to know. Apparently his family came from Illinois and North Carolina and my mother's from Mississippi via North Carolina.

Q: Did your father go to college or university?

WRIGHT: No, he was not fortunate enough to be able to go to college. But he was a very smart guy. He was able to parlay his work in small banks in Oklahoma initially as a bank teller before World War II and his experiences in the military into a very successful banking career. Dad epitomized the successful self-educated Midwesterner.

Q: This is of course was very much the pattern, that people of his generation often were not college graduates.

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: How about your mother? What was her maiden name and where did they come from?

WRIGHT: My mother's maiden name was Juanita Faye Park. She too was from Oklahoma, but from the southeastern part of Oklahoma and from an even smaller town than my father's little town called Blue, Oklahoma which was near Durant, Oklahoma. Mother came from a very modest family. She and her brothers and sisters picked cotton in the summer. Her family made their own lye soap in a huge iron pot that bubbled outdoors, had a huge vegetable garden and raised chickens and pigs for family consumption. I can remember as a child going to visit my mother's family and still having to use the outhouse perched above the Blue creek. My mother, remarkably, was able to go to college on a women's basketball scholarship.

Q: How wonderful.

WRIGHT: Yes. Back in those days, in the '20s and '30s, was kind of the heyday of women's sports. If you remember Babe Didrikson and?

Q: Oh, Babe Zachariah Didrikson, yes.

WRIGHT: That's right. Well, my mother beat Babe Didrikson's.

Q: In what?

WRIGHT: In basketball.

Q: Because she was a golfer and?

WRIGHT: Babe got her start, though, in basketball. She played basketball, as did my mother, and then both my mother and she coached basketball teams in Texas. It was through the scholarship at a small women's college in Durant, Oklahoma that my mother was able to get a college education. She then she became a schoolteacher and a coach. She taught for several years in Mesquite, Texas (near Dallas) where her teams played against Babe's. Just before World War II Mother took a high school teaching job in Grove, Oklahoma in northeastern Oklahoma. My Dad was working in the bank in Grove and that's where they met.

Q: What was the name of your mother's college?

WRIGHT: It was Oklahoma Presbyterian College for Women, OPC. The OPC Cardinals were the American Athletic Union (AAU) champions for four years in a row and won more games in a row than any other women's basketball team in the history of the sport. Because of this record the entire basketball team was inducted in 2003 into the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame. It was the first time an entire team was ever inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame. Only two members of the team were still alive in 2003, but family of each of the team members attended in their honor. Twenty members of my mother's family attended the induction. What a gala event - over one thousand people gathered to honor sports figures of Oklahoma.

Q: Well, that's a wonderful story. How did sports translate when they got down to you?

WRIGHT: That's a good question. Unfortunately there was a great demise in women's sports for America after the 1930s. When I went to high school in the early '60s and then college in the late '60s, America had not yet embarked upon the renaissance of women's sports. Title Nine that mandated equal opportunities in sports for women didn't take effect until later. However, I did play a lot of sports in the back yard of our little home in Arkansas. Mother and Daddy would be in the backyard pitching for kids in the neighborhood and teach us to play baseball. Our back yard became the focal point for all the sports activities of the neighborhood. I was a natural sportswoman and was as good as the boys in my neighborhood, in fact better than most of them. I loved baseball, basketball, football and tennis. It made me very mad that my guy buddies got to play Little League baseball and I didn't. We would practice together all week and then they would get to put on their uniforms and play in front of all the parents and friends. I was jealous!

Q: You grew up where? We're talking about by the time you were getting ready to go to elementary school.

WRIGHT: I went to elementary, junior high and high school in Bentonville, Arkansas. At the time Bentonville had no claim to fame, but now Bentonville is world-famous because it's the headquarters of Wal-Mart. Just down the road in northwest Arkansas is Jones Trucking Line, one of the largest interstate trucking firms and Tyson Chicken. I have been in some very remote areas of the world during my Foreign Service career and have found Tyson's frozen chickens in many of those isolated areas.

Q: Oh, my god.

WRIGHT: Yes, and in fact one of the great stories about Wal-Mart's beginnings concerns my Dad. Dad was the town banker in Bentonville when this young whippersnapper named Sam Walton moved to town and had an idea about having not one little five-and-dime store, but maybe two or three of them. He went to the Bank of Bentonville and asked for a loan to create this network of stores. The Board of Directors of the Bank of Bentonville said, "Oh, we're so sorry, Sam. This idea of having lots of stores to reduce the prices by purchasing wholesale in volume would never work." So the bank didn't loan him the money that he needed for his idea. But Daddy thought Sam had a pretty good idea, so he and a few others personally loaned Sam some money and that helped him get his second store and then his third store. So Wal-Mart is a part of the history of everyone who grew up in that part of Arkansas. Many of my friends from high school could not afford to go to college so they began working for Wal-Mart. Now after thirty years of federal service, I go back to Bentonville and find that these friends have now retired from Wal-Mart and are millionaires!

Q: In the first place, do you have brothers, sisters?

WRIGHT: I have one sister, eighteen months younger than I.

Q: So you were pretty close?

WRIGHT: Yes, although I think we have gotten closer the older we have gotten, and particularly after our mother died 25 years ago when she was only 65 years old. When she died suddenly, she was two weeks from retiring as a school teacher! My sister and I grew up with different interests. I was more academically oriented and she was more socially oriented. She was the cheerleader and on the homecoming queen's court and I was the student council secretary and co-valedictorian of our senior class.

Q: In the Wright family how did things work? Did you all get together for dinner and discuss things or were you all going your own way? How did that work?

WRIGHT: We always had for evening meals together. Daddy would always come home from work about five-thirty and we would eat immediately upon his arrival. Mother was a great cook. Mother, when we were younger, was a homemaker. When I cook (very infrequently) I usually prepare some dish I remember as a child. As my sister and I finished elementary school and went into junior high school, mother went back to her profession of teaching and taught junior high school social studies virtually until the day she died.

Q: What were the politics of the Wright family? Were they divided? How did it work? Do you recall?

WRIGHT: My dad was a strong Democrat and quite involved in local politics. He ran for political office in our little town of Bentonville and was the mayor for many years. He never campaigned as he felt that everyone already knew him through his work at the bank, as the President of the Benton Country fair for twenty years and as the president of the Rotary Club and other community service organizations. He supported democratic candidates for State offices. When Bill Clinton was governor of Arkansas, Bill would bring his mother Virginia up to northwest Arkansas to campaign for democratic candidates. Daddy was always Bill's mom's dinner partner on those trips. On the national level, both Mother and Daddy supported democratic candidates but, remarkably, I don't remember ever having any great political discussions.

Q: As you were going into elementary school were you much of a reader?

WRIGHT: Yes, I was an avid reader. I thoroughly enjoyed spending afternoons in Arkansas in the summertime when it was so very, very hot outside it was too hot outside to go ride your bicycle or play baseball; you either did that in the early morning or the late afternoon. In the early afternoon your last bicycle trip was up to the city library to check out two or three Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys mysteries and then race home, get a glass of iced tea and sit and read all afternoon.

Q: Was it a Carnegie library, I'm wondering?

WRIGHT: No, it was just a little 'ole Arkansas, little public city library. I think I knew every book in the library.

Q: When you weren't reading what did the kids do in the town?

WRIGHT: Well, the kids that I ran around with were very active and sports-minded. We had lots of energy and we needed to get rid of it, so we were on the bicycles racing all over town to visit friends or we were in either our back yard or one of the neighbors back yards playing baseball or football or basketball or, if it happened to snow, building snow forts. My childhood was a very active, active time.

Q: How about elementary school did any particular subjects turn you on or turn you off?

WRIGHT: Geography and history were my favorites and the rest of them were fine, but I think I enjoyed the social studies aspects of elementary school most.

Q: At that time were you getting any feeling about the Arkansas school system? Because Arkansas usually is pretty far down close to Mississippi, I think in those days as far as money expended per pupil and all.

WRIGHT: Well, that's true. In fact, there was a great saying in Arkansas; it was TGF thank god for Mississippi because they were the lowest on the totem pole on educational expenditures, and we were next to the bottom. That said though, the little town of Bentonville had a collection of teachers, both in elementary school and high school, that were excellent. I feel like I got as good an education as could've been had in America at the time. The teachers were dedicated, hard working and creative. Despite little money for the school itself, it just shows what can be done with a basic textbook and a teacher that's innovative and creative and really sparks an interest in kids. We had four national merit scholars in our senior class of one hundred, which says a lot about how our teachers got us interested in learning.

Q: Do you recall any of the names of teachers who particularly impressed you or rings in your memory?

WRIGHT: Oh indeed. There are a couple of them: in the third grade Mrs. Easley; in the fourth grade Mrs. Klauser; but probably the lady that had one of the greatest impact was Mrs. McKee. She initially was a fifth grade teacher. She had lived in South America. She had gone down there with her husband and two boys. She brought back lots of cultural items. She was a Foreign Service officer in disguise with all of the loot she brought back from South America. And she would bring her treasures into the fifth grade class and show us these wonderful items of South America everything from tribal clothing to Anaconda snake skins that were twenty feet long and she'd roll them down the aisle between the school desks and we would oogle and awe. Mrs. McKee was a singer; she played the accordion and we had songs and dances and singing in the fifth grade. When we moved up to the seventh grade, she was our seventh grade Spanish teacher, and was our eighth grade Spanish teacher, and ninth grade and tenth. So by the time we got through with four years of Spanish, we could do the South American show-and-tell that Mrs. McKee started out in fifth grade but we all knew it by heart now. She certainly sparked an interest in seeing the world and going out and exploring different cultures.

Q: Obviously I'm talking to a Foreign Service officer; when you're in the middle of Arkansas it's not the most promising place to get an international exposure. But I take it from Mrs. McKee and others? Was that something that interested you?

WRIGHT: No, I didn't have a clue about embassies or how America presented itself to other countries officially. What really got me interested in more international things was the Girl Scouts. We had a very strong Girl Scout program in our little town and virtually all the young girls were in Girl Scouts. At the time we could attend regional Girl Scout meetings and national meetings. The regional council for the southern part of the United States had a very strong program of taking girls from all over the South to various unique locations in the South such as hiking trips in the Smoky Mountains or riverboat cruises for five days up and down the Mississippi, going all the way to New Orleans. Then on the national level I went to a Girl Scout "roundup," one of which was in Idaho. I also attended a national camp in Michigan and national conventions one time in Miami, Florida and then went on my first international trip to the Bahamas since it was so close.

So it was really the Girl Scouts that got me out of Arkansas and traveling in the nation. At each one of those events there would be young girls from different countries of the world. I would think maybe someday I could try to visit my Girl Scout friend from the Netherlands or from Bolivia, or whatever. So traveling with the Girl Scouts really had quite an impact on how I saw the world.

Q: What about segregation and all that; how did that impact where you were?

WRIGHT: Bentonville was in the northwest corner of Arkansas, up near the border of Missouri and Kansas and Oklahoma. There were very few African-Americans that lived in northwest Arkansas. A few lived in thirty miles away in Fayetteville, the university town. In Bentonville we had seven African Americans, including Carl who was in my class. He started school in Bentonville in the mid-1950s. We were in the fifth grade or sixth grade when Carl came to school. He arrived just before most of the integrated schools were closed in Arkansas in 1958. Little Rock Central High School had the 82nd Airborne Division deployed on its grounds to keep order. The state of Arkansas apparently did not realize that we had already integrated our little school up in Bentonville and that Carl Stewart had been attending classes with us for a long time. We just kept our school open during the crisis that was going on in Little Rock.

I remember walking after school with Carl and his mother. His mother would meet him at school and escort him home. We lived in the same general direction so I would walk with them most of the way home. My mother told me to watch out just in case some people from outside of Bentonville had heard that we had an African American attending school and had come to Bentonville to cause trouble. Since we knew everyone in town and who lived in every house on the way home, Mother said to get Carl and his mother and run to the nearest house and get inside and then call for help. Fortunately, no strangers showed up in Bentonville.

But that said, African Americans really didn't stop in northwest Arkansas. For about a one hundred mile stretch from Joplin, Missouri down to Fayetteville, Arkansas, African Americans did not stop for gasoline, for food or for lodging.

Q: This was around 1955 or so.

WRIGHT: 1958 I think it was.

Q: '58. This was towards the end of the Eisenhower administration.

How about American Indians in Arkansas and Oklahoma?

WRIGHT: The Ouachita Indians in Arkansas were further south in Arkansas, down around Fort Smith in the central part of the state on the western border. The Cherokee Indian Nation was headquartered in Tahlequah, Oklahoma which was only about 150 miles from us. But, in our part of Arkansas, we had very little contact with Native Americans.

However, my mother's sister in southeastern Oklahoma married a full-blooded Choctaw Indian. Therefore, my first cousins are half-blooded Choctaw Indians. In the past twenty years there has been a wonderful growth of pride in being of American Indian heritage. My cousins are board members of various aspects of Choctaw Indian life including medical and housing. Now that the federal government has honored commitments for return of Native American lands, many tribes are able to finance incredible advances in health, education and housing for members of their communities. Interestingly, many tribes have chosen to build and operate casinos to earn money. The Choctaw nation has two huge casinos and buses that bring gamblers from Houston, Dallas and Oklahoma City to lose their money to the Choctaw nation. My cousins who are board members travel all over the United States meeting with representatives of other Native American tribes to compare notes on what programs are working for each tribe. I am so proud of what they have done.

Q: Did the Cold Wave're taking up through your high schoointrude at all? Were you aware of developments?

WRIGHT: I don't remember learning so much about the cold war in high school. Where I remember learning a lot was in our church, in the Methodist church. Our Methodist youth fellowship met on Sunday evenings. For several years we had a program about Marxism and Leninism. That is really what I remember most about the Cold War is from those classes, and yet in a religious environment.

Q: Was it a pretty small high school?

WRIGHT: Yes, our graduating class had 100 students in it, so the whole high school had about 300.

Q: What sort of things were you doing in high school?

WRIGHT: Oh, it was a very busy time in high school. [laughs] And of course in those small high schools whenever any club starts up, everyone has to be a member of it. So you were a member of every single thing in the world, everything from the Future Homemakers of America, which I was a very good club member but I've never been an official homemaker after that; the National Honor Society, the Spanish Club and the Latin Club. After school we had many club meetings and many after-school activities. For me, after school events centered around the Girl Scouts. I remained a very active member of the Girl Scouts all through high school.

Q: What's the top rank in the Girl Scouts? I know it's Eagle Scouts for boys.

WRIGHT: The Girl Scouts don't have a comparable category as the Eagle Scout. IN the Girl Scouts you earned merit badges on a variety of topics and interests. I earned lots of badges. Most everyone in our Girl Scout troop earned the same badges.

Q: You had almost the same teachers then all through, didn't you?

WRIGHT: Yes, some of our teachers moved from elementary school into junior and senior high school positions. Every now and then we did get new blood into the teaching staff. One new English teacher caused quite a stir in our town when we were seniors. He was a young man just recently graduated from college, and brought life into the senior English classes. Never we so many students interested in writing good essays so we could be on Mr. Ross's good list! Student teachers from the University of Arkansas were always welcome to break the monotony of the teachers we had known since childhood.

Q: Oh boy.

WRIGHT: Yes. And somebody that was closer to our age. Of course half the student body had crushes on Mr. Ross and all of a sudden your interest in English just shot up. [laughs]

Q: [laughs] I was going to say.

WRIGHT: And fortunately he was a very good, good teacher and a very disciplined teacher of English. He understood what we needed to have for college, in terms of writing papers and the right skills to pursue further education.

Q: What was the thrust of the school in these days? We're talking up through '64, I guess.

WRIGHT: Yes, I graduated from high school in '64.

Q: Was it a track system of some going to college, some going to secretarial, some going to be mechanics or going for the MRS degree or what-have-you?

WRIGHT: Like today, family economics determined who went to college and who did not when I was in high school. If your family could help you go on to college, virtually anyone who could get the money together had a good enough background from our little, tiny school that they could handle college. So it became a function of whether or not your family could cough up the bucks to get you through college. I think for a little town in Arkansas we had a very high number of students that went to college, which is a credit to the teachers for our preparation and also to our guidance counselor. In particular one lady, Ruth Parker, our guidance counselor forever, was very diligent about contacting all the small colleges throughout the state to make sure that everyone from our school who wanted to go to college had a chance to qualify for a scholarship.

That said, those who decided that they didn't want to go to college, or couldn't go to college, or tried college for a year and found they didn't really like it, still had a chance for economic opportunity. Wal-Mart was moving right ahead in Bentonville as was the J.B. Hunt trucking company and Tyson's, the big chicken company. All three of those organizations were building up their operations. So there were jobs to be had, very good jobs to be had, for people that didn't want to go to college. As a result, when I go back to my little town in Bentonville, many of my high school classmates have retired from those companies and are multi-millionaires because they started working as the stock boys and girls for the first Wal-Mart stores and then became the managers of a tiny little stores in some small city or town in Arkansas or Oklahoma or Missouri. Then they came back to Bentonville to be the buyers for a section of Wal-Mart and then went out again to be the manager of a bigger store. As Wal-Mart started growing and growing, these employees grew with the organization. Those who stuck with it, and most of them have, have ended up in a very fine financial situation.

Q: You might explain, for somebody who might not know, what a Wal-Mart is, and also J.B. Hunt and Tyson's.

WRIGHT: Surely. The Wal-Mart organization is, I think, now the largest company in the world [laughs]. Wal-Mart started out from one five-and-dime merchandise store in Bentonville, Arkansas. Sam Walton, the founder, decided that if you own two or three stores then you can buy in bulk and sell at a cheaper price. He took that theory to the penultimate. Wal-Mart now has thousands of stores all over the world and Wal-Mart buys from all over the world at the cheapest prices possible and then passes those low prices on to the consumer.

J.B. Hunt is a very large trucking company that moves goods throughout America. It started out in a little town called Springdale and moved primarily poultry product chickens and turkeys that were being grown there for another organization called Tyson's. Tyson's is one of the largest chicken producing and processing companies in the world. All three of these organizations grew up in a geographic area within a twenty-mile radius of my little town of Bentonville, Arkansas. [laughs]

Q: Speaking of chickens and all, yesterday we were both at Foreign Affairs Day at the State Department and the assistant secretary for European affairs was saying that our main problem with Europe now is chickens and we've had these chicken wars that have been going on. Essentially we want to sell a lot of chickens and the poultry farmers of Europe have quite a lobby and they resist and this is a perpetual conflict.

WRIGHT: Indeed. Another part of the chicken wars is what are called Bush's legs. Back in the early '90s I helped open the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan and from 1994-96 I served in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. During that period as the Soviet Union's Eastern Block countries and the Central Asian republics were becoming independent, a flood of frozen chicken legs and thighs arrived in the region. It was one of the first attempts at "humanitarian assistance" from the U.S. government for countries in the region. The chicken was surplus that we had in America produced by Purdue and Tyson. The U.S. government helped get the surplus into Europe and probably under a special deal with very low prices. Since all this happened under the Bush administration, everyone in the region called the chicken "Bush's legs" as legs and thighs were all you could buy throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia. You never knew where the chicken breasts went, or any other part; all you ever saw were the legs and the thighs.

I can imagine that Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Beth Jones was commenting strongly about the challenges of trying to move American produce, in particular chickens, into areas that will undercut locally produced chickens. While we want the world to open up to our products, we can produce chicken and pork so much more cheaply than the Europeans, that it makes their locally grown items uncompetitive.

Q: Well, during the Kennedy administration we had the so-called chicken wars with the Netherlands and France and Germany and all. It was the same thing.

Given the backgrounds of your mother and father, they were pushing you towards college?

WRIGHT: Yes. My mother felt very strongly that both my sister and I should go to college and my dad certainly agreed with it. My mother said that my sister and I had to come out of college with a skill that you can use anywhere in the country. She said the basic skill that every woman ought to have is a school teaching degree because there'll always be schools. She said, "I don't care what you study, but one of the degrees you have to come out with is a teaching certificate."

Q: Were you pointed towards anything? You talked about your guidance counselor that was so good. What was she telling you?

WRIGHT: I really wasn't pointed toward any particular occupation or subject matter. I had done well in high school; I graduated as a valedictorian of our little school against some very stiff competition, I must say. In fact, in our little group of 100 that graduated, we had four National Merit Scholars, which was quite a large number for such a small high school. My fellow students from our little high school have done very, very well in their professional careers. Essentially I felt anything was open to me. I ultimately gravitated toward biological sciences and physical education. I graduated with teaching degrees in both of those. But I also had taken a huge number of courses in political science and sociology.

Q: Well, where did you go to college?

WRIGHT: The first year I went to Hendricks College, a small Methodist school in the center part of Arkansas. It was probably the best college in the state. I loved going to Hendrix very much but it cost a lot of money to go there.

Q: Why would it cost so much?

WRIGHT: It was a private college and the most expensive in the state. It cost much more than what the state schools cost. The second year I was in college was the first year my sister started college, so having two kids in college it was financially a challenge for my parents. Though my parents never said, "You ought to transfer to the University of Arkansas because Hendrix College is too expensive," I felt that was appropriate for me to go to the less expensive university. I completed the last three years at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville.

Q: Was it a mix of male and female?

WRIGHT: Yes, Hendrix College was a co-ed institution.

Q: This had been '65 to '68 about?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: What was the University of Arkansas like in those days?

WRIGHT: It was good university with about ten thousand students. It did have a bit of a reputation as a party school. There were plenty of parties but there was a lot of good serious academic work going on there. It was a small university compared to universities such as our bitter rival, the University of Texas. While I attended the University of Arkansas from 1965-68, it was the heyday of University of Arkansas football. We had two national champions. That, of course, was the highlight of much of our stay at the university, the football team. [laughs]

Q: Again, you were off in a field of both teaching and biology that would move you away from sort of the international scene or not. Were you keeping up with things? Because I would think it would be very difficult unless you read the New York Times daily or something like that.

WRIGHT: No, I was not particularly interested in international affairs at the time. I did know I wanted to do international traveling, but I didn't really have any aspirations to go into international affairs. I had no friends, acquaintances, family members, or anybody that I knew that was involved in foreign affairs. What I did know though is, as I mentioned before, I wanted to travel outside America. I wanted to escape Arkansas and see the world. So, in my junior year, the army recruiter came to the University of Arkansas and showed a movie join the army, see the world. I thought, oh, this is one thing I could do. I thought, I know I can march because I'd been a part of the University of Arkansas Marching Razorbacks, the band of the University of Arkansas.

Q: What did you play in the band?

WRIGHT: Well, I actually didn't play anything. I wasn't a musician but I wanted to go on all the trips to watch the football games. So I went to the band director and said, "I know I can learn to march. Do you ever have people that you let carry musical instruments in place of band members that get sick?" and they said, "Yes, we do." So I became a band substitute [laughs]. I carried many instruments everything from a clarinet and a trumpet to a big tuba thing and sometimes the big bass drum, whatever they needed to be carried, I could carry it.

Q: [laughs] just don't play it.

WRIGHT: That's right. [laughs]

Q: Well, it sounds like an ideal preparation for the Foreign Service. Bluff it through. [laughs]

WRIGHT: That's right. Think fast on your feet. Where did the people in my line go? Don't get left in the middle of the field.

Q: This must've been an exciting time to be doing this with the team doing so well.

WRIGHT: Yes, it was. I wanted to go down to Dallas to see the Arkansas Razorbacks play teams like SMU (Southern Methodist University) and Texas Christian University. And I definitely wanted to go to the Cotton Bowl. I ended up going to all of those games and it was great fun.

Q: With this marching experience how did this pan out?

WRIGHT: [laughs] I told the army recruiter that I knew I could march and what was the rest of the army stuff all about. The recruiter said, "Well, why don't you join?we've got a program the summer of your junior year in which you can go join the army for three weeks and see if you like it. We put you through a small three week training session which will be very similar to the officer basic course that you would go through if you really join the Army after college." And then he said, "If you like it and if you'll sign up after this three week course, we will put you on active duty for your senior year of college and you'll be making money as an E-3, as a corporal in the army. You don't have to do anything but go to college and complete that last year. You will have a two year commitment after college." Well, having the opportunity to have some money in my pocket my senior year, that was really tempting. So I signed the dotted line and went to army training for three weeks after my junior year and was committed to the army after graduation.

Q: How did you find that?

WRIGHT: I found it fascinating. I enjoyed it very, very much. We had about one hundred college juniors for three weeks at the Women's Army Corps Training Center at Fort McClellan, Alabama. We had great camaraderie and about half of us decided to join the Army after graduation.

Q: Things have changed so much. How was the army treating women in those days from your perspective?

WRIGHT: Well, it was segregated treatment. We were in what was called the Women's Army Corps. You couldn't join any other branches of the army like military intelligence or military policy or adjutant general or anything like that. All women, except nurses, were put into the Women's Army Corps. Nurses were in the Army Nurse Corps. So all the jobs women held were generally administrative jobs.

Compared to the wide number of jobs that women can have now in the military, and which we pushed for, those of us that went into the Women's Army Corps and then we started seeing what else was available that we knew we could do, then we started pushing to have the army open up lots more career fields to women, which they subsequently have done.

Q: When you went into this three-week thing, was there any feeling of limitation or was this really opening up for you, from your experience?

WRIGHT: At the time I thought it was great. It got me out of Arkansas; it had the potential for getting me to other parts of the country, much less the rest of the world. I thought it was great. It taught me leadership and management skills very early. It taught me how to run budgets. It really provided a basis which has been extraordinarily useful for a lot of things subsequently.

Q: When you graduated you had your teaching degree and your biology degree?

WRIGHT: Yes. I was commissioned into the U.S. Army on the day that I graduated from the University of Arkansas in 1968. Two or three weeks later I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama for the three-month officer basic course.

Q: How did you find the officer basic course? In the first place, what were your fellow officer recruits? Were they all women in that group at that time?

WRIGHT: Yes, college graduates and then some enlisted women who were going through the officer candidate school for enlisted to be then commissioned as officers women from all over America, which was so interesting to be in the same platoon with people from the state of Washington and California, New York, and all of this, just getting to know people from all over America. And going through a very remarkable training process that the military does where they, in a short period of time, can get everyone dressing alike, marching alike, working as a team, learning important things that they need for their future careers, and giving you really good skills in leadership and management.

Q: Well, this brings up a subject that while you were at the University of Arkansas, we're talking about the time of great turmoil on campus over Vietnam. How did that impact on you, before the military came in?

WRIGHT: You know, you follow the war and of course it was a very brutal war and we were just beginning to get the television footage, although much delayed, of the Vietnam War, which was pretty staggering in terms of the carnage on both sides of it. At that point I thought America was doing what America was supposed to do. I really wasn't questioning the political leadership of our country having gotten us involved. In 1968 during our officer basic class we had some young women from the Vietnamese Army who were going through our officer class and we also had some women from the Thai Army and from the Korean Army. So we got to be friends with those officers. The women officers from Vietnam certainly supported the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. At that time I felt the U.S. was assisting the people of Vietnam from the communist forces that we intent on taking them over. I felt the North Vietnamese were the "puppets" of the Chinese and Soviet communists and did not represent the will of the Vietnamese people.

Q: I would think that the University of Arkansas, being sort of in the heartland where it's sort of a military culturcoming from the South and all thithat it wasn't as though the equivalent to the University of California or some of the eastern schools on the ladder.

WRIGHT: That's true. I don't remember any antiwar protests. There probably were some very small ones but in 1967 and 1968 by and large the overwhelming majority of people in the university and in Arkansas were supporting the war effort.

Q: During your officer candidate training were you getting any talk about the issues and the problems in the country and all?

WRIGHT: Yes, definitely, and that probably was as enlightening as anything I'd had in college, or more. I can remember being in the Army officer basic course in 1968, just after I had graduated from the University of Arkansas, when the Democratic convention in Chicago was disrupted by antiwar protests. I remember feeling conflicted about the demonstrations. I was now in the Army that was fighting in Vietnam. And now fighting had broken out in America over the war in Vietnam. At that point, though, I believed that America's help to South Vietnam to fight the communist North Vietnamese was appropriate. I was a believer in the domino effect; if South Vietnam fell to the communist North, supported by the Chinese and Russians, then other countries would fall too.

Q: Was there any sympathy for the protests among your group, or even feeling about the protests?

WRIGHT: Well, yes. It wasn't that everybody was buying the administration's line totally. Many of the demonstrators' points were meaningful to me: the carnage, deaths of both Americans and Vietnamese, the Viet Cong and the Viet Cong sympathizers. The huge amount of armaments that were used in Vietnam I think caught all of our attention.

Q: Were you getting any feedback from officers who had served in Vietnam in talking about what they were experiencing and all of that?

WRIGHT: My first assignment out of basic training was really where all of that happened because my first assignment, even though I volunteered to go to Vietnam I wanted to go see that for myself but as a second lieutenant right out of the officer basic course they weren't sending new women officers to Vietnam; they wanted you to have at least one assignment under your belt so they could evaluate whether or not you could handle a war zone. Instead of Vietnam I ended up going to the Presidio of San Francisco, a great first assignment or last assignment. San Francisco was a fascinating place in 1969 and '70 because of all of the antiwar demonstrations and the Haight-Ashbury scene.

Q: This is where the hippies at the time?

WRIGHT: Antiwar activists and hippies, the ultimate peace movement came out of San Francisco. And a large number of the military personnel were going AWOL (Absence without Leave). They said, "We don't want to go to Vietnam; we don't want to get killed; we don't want to get killed in Vietnam; we don't think the war is right." All of these comments hit me in the face as a little second lieutenant in San Francisco on my first assignment. One of my jobs had a direct bearing on the guys that had gone AWOL. As a second lieutenant I ended up writing replies to congressional inquiries that the Presidio of San Francisco military command received from family members of people who had been picked up as AWOL. AWOL military were thrown in the Presidio stockade and alleged they received bad treatment in the stockade. Several confined in the stockade died in the stockade and there were allegations of murder in the stockade. I, as a little second lieutenant, had to go over to the stockade to start talking to the hierarchy of the stockade about the allegations that were being made in the letters from family members that had been forwarded to us by members of Congress.

The more I investigated and followed up with people that you'd meet here and there on post I found there was some truth to these allegations. So my duty was to bring my findings to the attention to the post leadership- (end of tape)

The leadership of the Presidio initially didn't believe what I was finding about there being problems in that stockade, until there was an unexplained death in the stockade. The stockade leadership, of course, just shut up about everything. I couldn't get any information on this reported death from stockade leadership. That incident got the attention of the senior leadership of the post. Then subsequently many resources were then put into finding out what was going on with that stockade and a lot of people were court-martialed for their involvement in legal, criminal actions that were going on there. Eventually we did get the stockade problems cleaned up but the actions of those officials charged with the responsibility of the stockade were very harmful to the image of the U.S. Army.

Q: What was your reading on the people before it got cleaned up the people you were talking to at the stockade?

WRIGHT: They were feeling that those who were going AWOL were certainly unpatriotic [laughs], that they had broken their bond with the military, they had done an illegal act by going AWOL, and that virtually any treatment that they were accorded was just fine. It was pretty brutal treatment.

Q: We're talking about a time when there was the draft.

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: So this was not a volunteer military.

WRIGHT: That's correct. There were a lot of people in there that didn't want to be in the military.

Q: Did you find yourself getting caught in the crossfire?

WRIGHT: To an extent. In the early days, yes, because it was the stockade officials saying, "Nothing's wrong here. That little second lieutenant doesn't know what she's talking about," and it took a while to prove your mettle in it, so to speak, and to provide enough information that the senior leadership had faith in what you were doing.

Q: Well, I would think, too, you'd be up against several things. One, you're brand-new; the old term, you were real shave-tailed in those days. The other thing, this was still pretty much a man's army and when you get to prison treatment, stockade, MP (military police) officers, this is the redneck part of the military. I spent four years as an enlisted man. I avoided that military police like crazy because I knew what you're up against. I would've thought that you, being both brand-new and a woman, would have real problems with these guys.

WRIGHT: Well, like in any system you learn to work the system and you find ways that you can get your information. I knew the commander of the stockade was not going to give me any information, nor would the sergeant major of the unit in charge of the stockade. But I found people more my own age that worked in that stockade and started talking to them, making friends with them, trying to be non-threatening, yet trying to get information. Then, as we find out in our Foreign Service careers, when we're talking with people in various governments throughout the world, there are always some people that if you work things right, you develop a repertoire with them and sometimes you can get some very sensitive information out of some who sometimes you're kind of surprised that they will tell you. That was the same way of kind of working the system back in Army days.

Q: Did you have any chance to sample the fruits of Haight-Ashbury and all that? I always think for a little girl from Arkansas it would be kind of fun to put on civilian clothes and go out and take a look at this subspecies.

WRIGHT: Oh absolutely. And just because I was in the military, I had just been in the military six months. I wanted to see this phenomenon called Haight-Ashbury. So you'd throw off your army uniform and put on your dungarees and head on down to see what was going on in San Francisco. Of course the one thing you knew not to do was to go into any peace marches or anything like that. At that point I was not tempted to go into the peace marches; I believed, at that point, that what we were doing was okay. Subsequently I changed my mind on it, but at that point I was okay with it.

Q: From your sampling of going around there, was there much of an interesting cultural, intellectual life going on there or was it more one of sitting around talking profound thoughts and smoking dope?

WRIGHT: Oh, in Haight-Ashbury?

Q: Yes.

WRIGHT: Quite honestly I really wasn't around it that much. I would go in the tourist shops and hang out on the streets and all. I didn't have any great friends that were living there so I was more of just looking in at it rather than being a part of it.

Q: In the Women's Army Corps, at a certain point you must've been integrated into command and doing something, weren't you?

WRIGHT: In the 1960s and early 1970s, the only units in the Army a woman could command were Women's Army Corps units, WAC companies. And we had WAC companies in virtually every major military base in the United States and in most of the military commands in Europe and Korea and Japan. I did not command any of the WAC units. I ended up staying on active duty with the Army for three years at that time. I spent one year in San Francisco and then went to Europe for two years. In Europe I was a dependent schools officer and a special services officer for a NATO sub-command, an international command, in the Netherlands. So I didn't get command experience then, but then several years later after I had gotten out of the army and then came back into it, I was in a command position in a Civil Affairs, Special Operations unit, in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Q: When did you go to the Netherlands?

WRIGHT: After a year in San Francisco I went to the Netherlands and spent two years there.

Q: This would be when?

WRIGHT: In '71. I enjoyed very much my first time in Europe and the opportunity to travel all over Europe. I decided I liked the European style of living. After two years in Europe I decided that rather than going back to the United States and going into what probably would've been a command position with one of the Women's Army Corps units, I wanted to get out of the army. So I requested a release from active duty and stayed another three years in and out of Europe. I remained in the Army reserves in Europe.

Q: So this of course was when there was a big drawdown because about that time was when we were getting out of Vietnam.

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: And so the Army was trying to get rid of a lot of soldiers.

WRIGHT: To an extent. It was in '73 and '74 that we actually signed the peace accords. We were pulling troops out of Vietnam but still the numbers in the Women's Army Corps were staying pretty stable. But combat units like infantry, artillery and combat engineers were downsizing rapidly. I wanted to stay in Europe longer than the Army wanted me to, so I got a release from active duty.

Q: So how did you survive?

WRIGHT: Well, I had saved up a lot of money in the army in the two years that I'd been in Europe, and then I stayed in the Army reserves. So whenever I would start getting low on money I would call up the reserves office in Heidelberg, Germany and ask if they had any special projects they needed to have done. Usually they had something that a captain could do, so I'd go on active duty for a month or two months, and get some money and go traveling again.

During that time I took a six month overland trip from London to Kathmandu, Nepal.

Q: Oh, boy.

WRIGHT: That trip back in 1972, actually paid off in a variety of ways in my Foreign Service career. There were fourteen of us that met on a street corner in London to catch a big Bedford truck. We threw all of our stuff in the back of it and off we went on a six-month adventure. None of us knew any of each other. We traveled in the back of this truck, camping out the whole way, through Europe and then down through Yugoslavia and the northern part of Greece then Turkey. At that time you could go into Iran so we spent about a month traveling all through Iran, then a month in Afghanistan. So, thirty years later in 2001 when the U.S. went after Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, I was selected to be on a five-person team that reopened the U.S. Embassy in Kabul in December of 2001. One of the things I think that the South Asian bureau considered when they picked me as one of the five people was that I had at least set foot in that country, even though it was thirty years before! [laughs]

Q: During the time you were on this trip, I was a consular officer in Greece and spent a good part of my time visiting young Americans who were in jail because they were right on the hashish route. Every country there that you visited raised the hackles of a consular officer, saying, "Oh, my god."

WRIGHT: Well, I'm surprised you didn't come to see us because we thought we were going to get thrown in jail in Greece. We had gotten to the Greek-Turkish border and were trying to get across it. Earlier in our trip, we had lost our table that was stored under the bottom of the truck. We would pull the table out and set it up and do all of our cooking on it. Somewhere in Greece we had left the table. As we were driving through northern Greece, one of the guys in our group spotted a bunker that had a door it that looked about the same size as what we needed for our table. So he pulled the door off its hinges and put the door under our truck and off we went. Well, turns out there were plenty of people in that area that saw this big truck with all these hippies ripping the door off the bunker. By the time we got to the border there was a great number of Greek police waiting for us. The Greek customs officers went through every single thing we had. They opened up every roll of film, they opened up every single package, everything, and thank god we had all sworn when we left London that nobody would use drugs on this trip because we knew that the probability of somebody getting caught doing that was really high in those areas. And if one got caught, everybody was in trouble. So fortunately nobody had broken the bond. The Greek police didn't find any drugs; there weren't any to be found because no one in that group was using drugs. But the police searched as if every other group they'd ever seen had had plenty of drugs. [laughs]

Q: Oh boy.

WRIGHT: The police were approaching our group like the U.S. approached looking for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. They're in there someplace. We have to keep looking.

Q: What were your impressions, particularly when you got into Turkey and Iran?

WRIGHT: Well, it was fascinating. Such different cultures from what I had been used to in certainly Arkansas, and even my small two-year experience in Europe. Turkey and Iran where the dress was so much different and the religions were so different and the history you read about in western civilization was coming alive there. The Shah was still in Iraq. You could tell the government was very heavy handed. "Disciplined" might be the very best term you could put onto it. We were just getting hints of the torture that the intelligence units were doing to the Iranians. Even as a tourist, one knew you did not want to get crosswise with government security groups.

Q: SAVAK.

WRIGHT: SAVAK, yes.

Q: How did you find this group of people on your truck being received by some of these countries? You're going through some of the areas that strict Islam was the order of the day and all and nothing could be more of an antithesis than a busload of young European and American was this?

WRIGHT: Yes, we had British, New Zealanders, Australians, a couple of Germans and a couple of Americans. I think the citizens of the countries we went through were very tolerant of us-young travelers generally camping outside small towns, buying food in small markets. We didn't have confrontations with anyone. As I remember the group, it wasn't an arrogant, belligerent sort of group. We knew it was going to be a tough trip in many ways and I can't remember any specific thoughts of the dos and don'ts of Iran. I guess there was enough cultural savvy with everyone that we really didn't step on too much other than ripping off the door of that bunker and the normal number of problems that newcomers to a culture, unfortunately have.

Q: Did you get any feel, during this time or back when you were in the Netherlands, for the Foreign Service and diplomacy?

WRIGHT: No, not really. I still hadn't become that interested in foreign affairs for the sake of foreign affairs. I enjoyed living in other countries but I hadn't thought of foreign affairs as a career. That really didn't happen until a little bit later, after I had come back to the U.S. I ended up taking the Foreign Service exam in 1976. I had been a student at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Some other students were going to take the exam. I had been reading literature about embassy life and thought that would be interesting to take the exam. I had some international experience outside of the military. After the six-month tour through South Asia, I worked in Greece for a year-and-a-half with the U.S. Navy when the Navy home ported the Sixth Fleet in Athens. In Greece was the first time that I had been in an embassy. The U.S. Naval Support Command in Athens was just up the street from the U.S. Embassy.

Q: Up through July of '74 I was consul general there.

WRIGHT: Ah, then that was the same time!

Q: Were you aware of the embassy saying, "Oh god, can't they home port somewhere else?" I mean everybody was doing their job to promote this, but the feeling was that homeporting the Sixth Fleet in Athens was awful.

WRIGHT: [laughs] Oh I can imagine because the numbers of American families that were moving in to Athens with the military was huge. Trying to find lodging and to set up school systems for them was a big challenge. That's where I came in. I was traveling through Athens, by car with a friend down to Turkey for a school teaching job. We stopped in the school superintendent's office in Athens and while this friend was in talking to the superintendent, I talked to the deputy. He found out about my time in the Netherlands working with dependent schools and said, "We're home porting the Sixth Fleet in Athens and we're opening up two schools, one in an old hotel, and we are so far behind. We need help. Would you consider coming back from Turkey and helping us out?" And I thought, well, Greece looks pretty good. I said, "I don't have enough money to come back through Athens. Could you fly me back?" and he said, "Yes, we'll pay for your flight and put you up in a hotel for thirty days until you can get your own apartment." So I ended up coming back to Athens and helping set up that school in the northern Athens suburb of Kiffisia.

Q: This pattern, I had never realized that you could go in and out of the army.

WRIGHT: Yes, I was on and off active duty with the Army for twenty-six years. I have now retired as an army colonel with a total of about thirteen years on active duty and then thirteen years in the reserve component. I went back and forth on active duty several different times. After I had been in Greece for a-year-and-a-half, I went back to Arkansas and was on active duty with the army to help with the Vietnamese resettlement project. In 1974, the U.S. moved 300,000 Vietnamese out of Vietnam with the fall of Saigon. The U.S. military set up four refugee camps in America. I helped with the refugee camp in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

Q: Yes, this was a major thing. This had been in '74?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: So they brought you back in and you never really lost your ties to the army?

WRIGHT: That's right. In fact, I've kept up my ties to the Army to include this week. Yesterday I just came back from the reunion of the Women's Army Corps in Fort Lee, Virginia. Every two years members of the Women's Army Corps have a reunion. So I just spent three days down there telling tall tales with all the colleagues from World War II and the Korean War and the Vietnam War. We have a new Women's Army Corps museum relocated from Ft McClellan, Alabama to Fort Lee, Virginia. The new museum records the accomplishments of all women in the Army, not just the WAC.

Q: While you were in Greece in '73 and '74, were you there during the November 17th, '73?

WRIGHT: Coup?

Q: Well, it wasn't a coup; it was a student revolt which was put down pretty bloodily, I think.

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: On the military side were you beginning to feel the problems of at that point there was essentially a military dictatorship which was increasingly unpopular in Greece - and by inference, also the American presence. Was this something that you were aware of?

WRIGHT: Surely. It was very disturbing. I was trying to do my job to create schools for the dependents of the U.S. military. I thought the homeporting of the Sixth Fleet was in good standing with the people of Greece otherwise why would the Sixth Fleet have been home ported there. Then all of a sudden you started having car bombs directed toward cars of U.S. military going off. I can remember vividly every day inspecting my car to make sure there was no pipe bomb in your car. Predating the security concerns we have now, thirty years ago we were taking major security precautions.

Q: A small bomb went off in my car. Luckily I wasn't in it. My wife was-

WRIGHT: Oh, my god.

Q: She went with some people to see a French play and when she came out was a time bomb; it wasn't very big it went off just as she got in the car. It really didn't do much damage, but still it's sort of startling.

WRIGHT: Oh absolutely. But then during that time we had two or three people that were killed with pipe bombs.

Q: Welsh was the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) chief. That was the beginning of the November 17th assassin group which is just now on trial.

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: We're talking about thirty years later and they finally apparently rounded them up.

WRIGHT: Yes, that certainly gave you pause whether the presence of the U.S. military and the agreements made by politicians for the deployment of these military forces in parts of the world is in America's best interest when elements within the society do not want U.S. military in there.

Q: Well, the driving force at that time, it's my understanding, was from Admiral Zumwalt of the Navy who was having a real problem keeping enlistments going because of the turnaround time. Men would be on these carriers and carrier groups and going just to and from deployment meant that they were away from their family a long time and that he was to bring them there. It was really a retention device.

WRIGHT: And what you ended up having, though, were families that had never lived outside the United States. Navy families, in particular, seldom live overseas in contrast to Army and Air Force families. When they decided to move the Sixth Fleet to Athens we ended up having a huge number of families that had never lived outside the southern United States. As parochial as many of those areas where navy bases are, and as insulated and isolated as people that live on military bases become, to have this huge group of people lifted out of the southern communities in the United States and all of a sudden put in a huge city like Athens, was a huge cultural shock to so many of those families. We tried to get the schools in operation so the schools could at least be one pillar of stability for the families - a very important part of the overall command strategy. Opening the schools on time proved to be very difficult too. It was a difficult deployment, I think, for the Navy in so many aspects. And the Navy didn't stay in Greece for very long.

Q: No, because there was a coup on July fourteenth, or something, of '74.

WRIGHT: Actually, the Greeks and Turks went to war first. I was on the island of Mykonos and got stranded there for three weeks when the war happened.

Q: That's the war between the Greeks and the Turks and then shortly thereafter was the coup.

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: This is all part of the warp and woof of American foreign policy. Did you have a chance to get the schools really started or not?

WRIGHT: Yes we did. We got the school in the hotel up in Kaffisia, in the northern part of Athens, started. We had to renovate the hotel, tear down hotel room walls and make big classrooms out of them. We set up a school bus system that went all throughout Athens picking up little kids and then having appropriate security for the students as car bombs started going off against U.S. employees. It was all quite an exciting adventure to get the schools started.

Q: How about the teachers; were you able to get good teachers?

WRIGHT: Yes. The Department of Defense overseas dependents school system very quickly staffed the new school. It was not hard to attract teachers to come to Athens. Once they put out the advertisement that they were going to start another school in Athens (there was one DOD school on the U.S. Air Force Base near the international airport), they were flooded with applications from teachers from all over Europe and some from Asia. We had a very good staff in the new school.

Q: Did you find yourself at all in a position of being a person who went out and talked to some of these families who came from inland South and talk southern to theyou know, one can always go back to ones rootand try to guide them into the new world?

WRIGHT: Actually, that really wasn't my job, although tangentially I did it. Whenever families were having problems with the support that the military was giving to the school, logistics support to the school itself, then I would become involved in it. Mostly the fathers with whom I would work on the staff of the Navy Support Unit would let me know thee problems their families were having. The Navy itself had a special unit that dealt with cultural issues. Our input on the school side of it was a part of it overall cultural unit. We did have some good 'ole southern folks that were on that cultural staff who could "interpret" the new culture in the language of the south! [laughs]

Q: You mentioned you were on Mykonos during the Turkish-Greek war over Cyprus in July of 1974. Did all communication stop? You couldn't get in and you couldn't get out?

WRIGHT: Yes. Wherever you were when that little war started you stayed for about three weeks. The Greek government stopped all air flights to the islands and all ferryboats. They had mobilized the ferryboats to take troops to Cyprus, and the same for the aircraft. I'd gone to Mykonos just for a nice weekend and was living in a little beach hut that had been put up. So for three weeks I was there. Thank goodness the fish never ran out and the ouzo (colorless Greek liquor) and retcina (Greek wine that tastes like turpentine) were plentiful [laughs] and suntan lotion handy.

Q: [laughs] Well, Mykonos, I imagine it's probably overcrowded these days, but in those days nobody was coming in.

WRIGHT: No, you had the beaches with whoever was there with you when the war started.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Greeks, not just in Mykonos but in Athens itself?

WRIGHT: To an extent. I lived in a little Greek community just outside of Glefada, the beach city, just outside the airport. All of my neighbors were Greek. I was taking Greek lessons so I could communicate reasonably well with them; in fact, to the extent that one weekend when I was out on another camping trip and was not expecting to have company, some dear friends from another part of Europe flew in on a military hop and arrived at my little house. No one was at my home so my neighbors took my friends into their home and took care of them for a-day-and-a-half until I returned. [laughs] My next door neighbors were very good friends.

Q: Were you there when thby this time it was the generals who were running the governmenwere deposed and a new democratic government came in?

WRIGHT: I had left by that time. The generals were still in when I left.

Q: Later on, of course, you'd be much more aware of this, did you get the feeling that our military knew what was sort of coming or were we going under the assumption that this home porting was going to work?

WRIGHT: I had planned to spend a year or a-year-and-a-half working for the Navy in Athens and then go on another wandering trip around more in the world. When I left Greece one of my bosses said, "If you decide to come back you always have a job herif we are still here." It seemed at that point that there were already discussions going on about how long the Sixth Fleet might be left there. I didn't get into any of the political analysis about whether the Navy would stay in Greece in my job.

Q: I left in July, 1974 just before all hell broke loose. It was a difficult time because I think that our embassy was dominated by people who were supporting the regime in power because it was anti-Communist. This proved to be an unfortunate happening.

Where did you go then? Did you go back and sort of do your wandering around?

WRIGHT: I traveled another six months, traveling around Europe, and then I thought it was time that I get back to the United States to see my family. I hadn't spent much time in the U.S. in four years. Since I'd been around international schools for a while, I decided to get a graduate degree in education. So I went back to the University of Arkansas and started a master's degree in educational administration. At the same time I started a law degree.

Q: Why a law degree?

WRIGHT: I had a passing interest in law but not all a big interest. But I had some friends that were in law school. The educational administration degree was not keeping very busy and I felt like I needed to have something else going on. So I studied for both degrees for a year. I finished the Masters in Educational Education in a year and then focused on the law degree.

Q: By chance did you run across that Arkansas phenomenon known as William Jefferson Clinton?

WRIGHT: [laughs] Well, as a matter of fact, I did. The first year that Clinton and Hillary arrived to the University of Arkansas from Yale to do their first year of teaching was the first year I was at the law school. I can remember that they had come from Yale and one was from Arkansas and had been a Rhodes Scholar. We were all about the same age. They were both instructors. Hillary taught and supervised the legal clinic where you provided legal services to people below the poverty line and also to the prison population of Arkansas. I found her to be an excellent instructor and teacher and very, very committed to giving the best legal services possible to those who couldn't afford it. I never had a course from Bill. But they were instructors for two years. Then Bill decided he'd run for Congress. He lost that election and then ran for the position of attorney general of the state of Arkansas and won.

Q: While you were doing this would be what, in '75?

WRIGHT: '76.

Q: How did you balance this off with trying to resettle refugees?

WRIGHT: Well, in April of '75 when Saigon fell to the VC (Viet Cong), hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing Vietnam. The U.S. government said that we would be taking in as many as we could get the people escaping by boat and others that were airlifted from Saigon. The Army mobilized quite a few reserve folks to help with this big program. Just after I got back to Arkansas and started graduate school, I joined up with an Army Reserve civil affairs unit in Fayetteville, Arkansas. People from that unit were mobilized to go down to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, which was only a fifty-mile drive away, to work the summer to help get the refugees processed and then assigned out to various organizations that were going to relocate them. So I became the person in charge of expendable supplies for 30,000 people. Expendables like sheets and towels and hats and diapers and baby formula anything that people kind of needed when they walked off a plane to a bus and then walked into an army barracks. Where do they sit; what do they sit on; where do they sleep; how often do you change the sheets. Where do get the things you need for little babies? Here was the army trying to provide for all of these problems. It was wild.

Most of the facilities at Fort Chaffee had been closed. We had to reopen barracks that hadn't been lived in for twenty years. We had to clean the facilities, build partitions, and fixing up mess halls to feed 30,000 people at a time. And feed them food that they would eat because they weren't used to hamburgers and hot dogs. These were people coming straight from Vietnam and being dumped in backwater Arkansas in an army barracks. That was really quite a cultural shock for all of us.

Q: Of course many of the people in the army had been dealing with the Vietnamese so there must've been quite a bit of sympathy, wasn't there, for the refugees?

WRIGHT: Yes there was. We had seen pictures on TV of the fall of Saigon and the brutalities that were happening there. I think all of America was very, very sympathetic to the plight of the South Vietnamese. Everybody worked so hard to try to make this transition, from destruction of their homes to getting on a plane and all of a sudden landing in this foreign place, to make it as easy as possible.

Q: Were you able to mobilize the people of Fayetteville to get involved?

WRIGHT: Well, yes. It was actually Fort Smith, Arkansas where Fort Chaffee was. There were many civic groups that were helping. All Vietnamese spent at least a week at the refugee camps. Large national refugee organizations mobilized to find locations all over America where refugees could live and work. The refugee groups used churches throughout America primarily to move out people and families as quickly as they could. As soon as we transferred fifty to some part of the country, there would be fifty new refugees to take their place in the camps. Thousands a day moved in and out of the camps. It was a mammoth logistic operation. Problems such as little babies getting sick - lots of little babies got sick. Finally the nurses realized "We think that these babies can't drink the type of baby formula that we have here." We discovered most Vietnamese babies were lactose intolerant. Then we had to find out where soy-based milk was manufactured. And at that time, thirty years ago, there were only two companies in America that made soy-based milk products. We ended up having to have those companies divert tractor-trailer loads of milk products into the three refugee camps so that the little Vietnamese babies would have something to drink.

Q: Was this something almost genetic within the Vietnamese population, a rice-eating group or something like that? Was that why they were not milk tolerant?

WRIGHT: They weren't used to cow-based milk products. They also weren't used to Arkansas rice; it didn't stick right. Arkansas was the second largest rice producer in America and the state of Arkansas had dutifully sent train loads of rice to Fort Chaffee. The Vietnamese would not eat the rice and they were complaining about it. We had to go back to the governor of Arkansas to say, "Thank you very much for all of this rice but these folks don't like your rice." That was the greatest friction we had with the state of Arkansas, that we couldn't use Arkansas rice!

Q: This is, of course, one of the big problems. Sticky rice, which is not produced in the United States, is the staple in, I guess, Thailand and Southeast Asia.

WRIGHT: Yes. It was a cultural surprise to us all but eventually we started getting in types of rice that they could eat. The numbers of carrots and onions and cabbage, and all of these things that form the basis of the diets of many of the Asian countries was staggering. To get these items in the quantities that we needed to have to have three meals a day for 30,000 people was something. [laughs]

Q: While you were doing this was this when you showed an interest in the Foreign Service?

WRIGHT: Yes. The following year I ended up going on a year's active duty with the Army at the Army's Command and General Staff College for the mid-level training for captains and majors. At that school some people talked about taking the Foreign Service exam. I thought the exam sounded interesting so I decide to take the exam and see what happened. I took the day long written exam and didn't pass it. I thought my failure was a little odd because I had scored very high on virtually every multiple choice test I'd ever taken. I thought it was odd, but okay, sometimes you don't pass things. It was three years later that I got a little postcard in the mail saying, "Several women have decided to submit a class-action lawsuit against the State Department because very few women were passing the written exam. We believed there was something wrong in the grading of the exam because there were a lot of very smart women who had done well in college and have taken GREs (Graduate Record Exams) and other tests and had passed them. Then none could pass the Foreign Service exam." So I decided to join the class action lawsuit. Every year thereafter I'd get a card saying, "Do you want to remain a member of this class action suit against the State Department?" I would dutifully send in my card. In 1986 the State Department settled out of court. Although the State Department did not acknowledge there was anything wrong with the test or the grading of it, they did say that they would allow the first 250 women that got back in touch with them to take the oral assessment without having to retake the written exam. (end of tape)

Q: I think they changed the exam later to put more of an emphasis on English, I think it was.

WRIGHT: My personal opinion is that they changed the grading of the test. I know for a fact that test was not any harder than any other that I had ever taken and I had taken the Graduate Record exam and the Law School entrance exam. I think the problem was in how the State Department graded the exam. I think the State Department did not want to have great numbers of women in the Foreign Service. They were grading the exam so that women were not passing it. That's my "objective" view.

Q: I'm not quite sure how they could manipulate that.

WRIGHT: The State Department determined each year how many new officers they needed. They passed only a certain number of applicants and no one had the right to have their multiple choice exam reviewed to see if the grader had graded it properly. The bottom line was that women were passing every other test at a certain statistical number and it was only the Foreign Service test we weren't passing. Although, I've certainly not gotten anybody to acknowledge that that my theory was true, to me that's the only rational way to look at it. The Foreign Service never answered the questions posed in the class action suit. Instead, they settled out of court without admitting what happened. For the Foreign Service to settle out of court means to me that something was fishy!

Q: I don't know how the manipulations, but I was with the Board of Examiners '75, '76. Now, I was just giving the oral exam. We were under considerable pressure on the oral exams to pass women. Unless somebody was fiddling with thithere have been studies and so I could go back, but if I recall it they were finding that there were a lot of questions on sort of foreign affairs, on economics and all, where these were the sort of courses men would take, whereas there was not as much emphasis on English and some other subjects that women were taking more. The questions were biased in favor of men. They were mostly written by guys; I helped write some of those things. So we weren't thinking of this, but these were questions that we thought of.

WRIGHT: What's interesting though is that every other written examination that had been used for the general publipeople that had graduated from college, generally the Graduate Record Exaone would think that because it is a wide ranging test too. The GRE would have questions on economics, questions on international relations, international affairmaybe not so picky and pointed as a Foreign Service officer writing something directly, but you would think if you can pass the GREs you can pass the State Department exam. What is fascinating to me is that the State Department would not come out and actually say what the actual grades were of the people that were not passing them. I think that would've been very helpful to the whole issue of transparency to find out really what was going on with this thing. Because I think I can pass any test just as good as a guy can pass any test. I've had the same preparations and I was passing them at the same high, high, high rate all throughout my life and career. To have that one, only that one, and to have a lot of other women being failed in it and they having the same background as mhaving passed everything else they'd ever donthat's why we all got together as a class to say something stinks here.

Q: My guess would band I'm not speaking as authoritative because I just had this job for a year and moved owas that the test was put together by the Princeton Testing Service, which is not part of the university but it's located in Princeton. It was a job specific one and they had people like mysell remember spending some time sitting down there figuring out questionand I think almost all of us were guys; and for some reason or another?because we were trying to think of job specific questions and I think maybe we were skewing the thing without really being aware and nobody cared until all of a sudden they started looking at it. That would be my guess.

WRIGHT: But I still think on international affairs and economics and other subjects on the exam were basic subjects that people coming out of colleges with bachelors and master's degrees would be exposed to. It would be one thing if men who had general broad backgrounds were failing at the same rate as women, but they weren't. It wasn't like every man that took that test had a degree in economics or international affairs. There were some that had very broad backgrounds too. Anyway, I think it would be fascinating if we could ever get the State Department to come forward with what the exam grading directions were.

Q: I think there have been analyses and I just haven't paid much attention.

WRIGHT: Well, I have paid attention because I was a part of that class action lawsuit and I can guarantee you the data that's needed in order to really find out what happened is not there. The State Department refused to provide the data in court and settled the case out of court because they didn't want to furnish the information. So I would say the State Department still has some explaining to do. [laughs]

Q: About fifty-fifty men and women in the Foreign Service.

WRIGHT: Yes, but historically it would be fascinating to see what was going on in the personnel field twenty years ago.

Q: But I do remember there was pressure on us to try to get women in. I'm talking about on the oral exam. There were three of us. If a woman was being examined we always had to have a woman on the panel and that sometimes was the problem because the woman on the panel was saying, "By god, if I made it, we're not going to give any special consideration," which meant there was a little tougher judgment there overall than there was on the guys.

WRIGHT: Well, that's interesting.

Q: This is something often the two guys would be arguing with the female member of the panel saying, "Come on now. Give a little slack here." [laughs]

WRIGHT: Well, sometimes women can be harder on other women than men are.

Q: This is a natural thing. This is true with African-Americans because we had some African-Americans who were always on one of these panels and they'd come up the hard way and they weren't going to cut any slack for somebody coming up.

Anyway, I want to go back. We've still got ten years to cover.

WRIGHT: Oh yes. Ten years more.

Q: What happened now?

WRIGHT: I finished law school and graduate school and got degrees in law and educational administration. My father in his soft-spoken manner observed: "Any time Ann gets an education in something, that is the definite guarantee that she will never get a job in that field." And he was right. After graduation from law school, instead of looking for a job in the legal field, I went to Lake Placid, New York and became the announcer for the luge events in the 1980 Winter Olympic Games.

Q: Good heavens! How did you get that?

WRIGHT: Well, I was sick and tired of being in graduate and law school. I wanted to get out of the academic environment and live without books hanging over my head. And it was the first time in twenty years that America had hosted any Olympic Games, so I thought working at the Olympics would be just what I needed. I drove my old Volkswagen camper bus up to Lake Placid and parked it in a parking lot and marched right up to what I thought was a huge bobsled track. The track turned out to be the luge run. I said, "I'm here to get a job. Where do I apply?" They needed manual laborers and I became a sprayer hosing down the luge course to put ice on it so that eventually they could start using it as a luge run. The longer I stayed and the colder the weather in Lake Placid got. I got to know the administrative people at the luge track and finally they said, "You being from Arkansas, we know you're going to freeze to death out in the Lake Placid winter. We've got a job coming up as the timer of the luge events. As the people slide down the track you will time them from inside the heated luge tower. As the timer you will also be the deputy director of the luge run and as such, you will be the alternate announcer. The announcer tells the lugers when they can get on the track and slide. Before the announcer allows a luger on the track, she must ensure that the entire track is empty. If there is a maintenance person on the track or an injured luger on the track, another luger flying down the course going fifty or sixty miles an hour can injure or kill someone on the track. Of course, an announcer tells the crowd about the individual lugers where they are from, what competitions they have won and how well they are doing in the current competition. As the Olympics approached I was tapped to be the official announcer for the luge events. So my little southern Arkansas accent was booming over Mount Van Hovenberg in Lake Placid announcing the luge events. [laughs]

Q: Well, after this winter escapade what did you do?

WRIGHT: Then, to prove my father's theory that I would not work in a field that I was trained in, I drove my old Volkswagen bus out to California to find my fame, not in law or education, but in marine biology and oceanography. I did many different things to get experience in marine biology. I volunteered on oceanographic research ships, at the Cabrillo Marine museum in San Pedro, took groups to Baja California to see the breeding grounds for the grey whales and worked for a year in Los Angeles as a crewmember on various types of ships to build up "days at sea." At the same time I was taking a course to qualify me for a marine vessel operator or a captain of a ship up of up to a hundred gross tons and one hundred miles offshore.

After a year of working in ocean related fields, I went flat broke in Los Angeles. I had had great fun but made no money. I had to face the reality that at age 35, I needed to find a good paying job. I applied at several companies in the Los Angeles area and also applied for a recall to active duty program the Army had for critically short fields. The dear army bailed me out again and recalled me to active duty. I went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina to teach at the School of International Studies at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy School of Special Warfare. The school trains Special Forces, civil affairs and psychological operations personnel. My primary focus was in critically short civil affairs field, the field I had worked in the Reserve component in Arkansas.

Q: This is an interesting place. So much is written about the Special Forces' superb training and all. I'm always a little bit dubious about the?you know, I was talking about the speaking ability and all of that, being in the Foreign Service knowing how difficult it is to teach languages and culture. It doesn't come naturally to most of us. How did you find it there?

WRIGHT: Well, the military does an excellent job in teaching a multitude of subjects. The U.S. military has the largest educational and training system in the world, and I think one of the best. The language training programs at Fort Bragg and their large Defense language institute in Monterey, California were and still are excellent. I believe DOD trains many more linguists each year than does the State Department.

Q: Of which I'm a graduate.

WRIGHT: Oh, are you?

Q: Back in 1951 I took Russian for a year.

WRIGHT: Oh did you?

Q: I was in the air force as an enlisted man.

WRIGHT: I found the DOD language training to be excellent. DOD had cultural affairs sections in the language training as well as the technical military equipment nomenclature. In fact, the teaching that I did at the special warfare center was a lot on cultural sensitivity and learning about the cultures of the various parts of the world that our soldiers were going to. I think that's where my interest in foreign affairs and international relations started. I was teaching subjects that were important for our soldiers who were deploying all over the world. We also had military officers from all over the world that were taking the courses I was teaching, both in civil affairs and psychological operations. We used many historical examples in our courses from World War II, the Vietnam War, the Algerian conflict, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Now we can add the experiences of Grenada, Gulf War I, Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Researching for the classes and really learning what you are teaching really sparked my interest in international issues.

Q: How did you bring yourself up to snuff?

WRIGHT: Well, a lot of reading and a lot of hard work. For every subject that's taught in the military you have a program of instruction which is essentially a script that your predecessor has written. You then modify it to your style and incorporate information that you find in your research. You have a basic format to learn well and then you modify it. In teaching in the military, you always have audio visual aids-slides, movies, anything to keep the attention of your audience.

Q: What areas were you working on?

WRIGHT: In the civil affairs school I was teaching a lot on the theories of civil military operations, of how a military force works in a civilian environment, which is exactly what we're doing in Iraq and Afghanistan. I ought to be helping right now because I've done civil reconstruction so many times in the past. Had I not resigned from the Foreign Service because of my disagreement with the Bush administration's decision to go to war in Iraq without finishing up Afghanistan and the real war on terrorism first, I would be fighting to get over there because it's right up my alley. But, back in the early 1980s, I was teaching historical examples of World War II military government in Germany and Japan, and then the civil operations and rural development in Vietnam (CORDS). I taught civil military operations, internal defense and development, cultural affairs. I also taught the law of land warfare which proved to be quite useful very quickly after I got to Bragg.

The first U.S. first military intervention since Vietnam occurred one year after I arrived at Fort Bragg. In 1983, the U.S. intervened in the small Caribbean nation of Grenada.

I had been teaching the Law of Land Warfare and the obligations of occupying military forces, and particularly the preservation of cultural artifacts to Eighteenth Airborne Corps and Special Forces units. The military occupying power has the obligation to identify public infrastructure facilities such as water, electrical power, sewage systems and cultural properties in military operations plans before you go into another country. The military plans identify specific forces whose sole job is to protect those facilities from inadvertent destruction or from looting. I feel certain that all the facilities that were destroyed or looted in Iraq were carefully identified by military planners and units identified to protect them. I suspect the civilian leadership of the Pentagon decided that the number of military personnel required to guard these facilities would have increased the overall total to a number that would have scared the American public and called into question some of the fundamental statements of the administration on how little personnel and money would be required to takeover Iraq. So a political decision was made to overrule military planners. And the result was massive destruction and looting that is costing the American public billions to repair. Actually, the American public is paying a few, administration connected big companies like Halliburton to repair the damage caused by bad decisions of the administration.

The after action report on Enduring Iraqi Freedom will be fascinating. Hopefully it will identify who pulled the troops that were identified a year ago or two years ago in the operations plans that were supposed to be protecting these things. Who gave the authority to pull them out, because I know for a fact I've written many of these operations plans and back in the '80s we were even writing them for the Middle East and we had identified even in Iraq, even in Syria, all these places. We knew exactly what buildings, what institutions, housed what cultural treasures and what, by international law, had to be protected. And we identified what military police units that would be going in to protect them, or the infantry units, or the civil affairs units, and we knew when they were coming in and they were coming in early because we knew that the probability of those things being targeted for looting would be high. So who pulled our troops out in the year 2003 and let all this havoc happen is going to be fascinating.

Q: It sounds as though in an effort to make the military as lean as possible that they bled off the troops that were supposed to be taking care of this in order to have more combat troops.

WRIGHT: Yes, but combat troops do not want to guard facilities. Other units have the mission statement and training to protect facilities. In fact, combat unit commanders from 3 stars down to captains will be incensed if their units are given that mission. This highlights a major dispute not only between DOD (Department of Defense) and State Department, but within DOD itself. It is one of the reasons why the Army Chief of Staff Shinseki has been in Rumsfeld's doghouse for the last year. Shinseki told Rumsfeld and the DOD staff that by international law you cannot fail to protect these facilities as the U.S. has obligations by international law to protect them and if we don't chaos will reign and we will not be upholding our international obligations. The military theory is that you don't necessarily always do things as fast as is physically possible but you do them in accordance with international law to protect the facilities that have been designated by the international community to be those things that have to be protected in military operations. The U.S. has signed on to these treaties that call for obligations of occupying powers, we have espoused them to other countries, and we have obeyed them in other conflicts. What is very disturbing is that the Bush administration is throwing out many treaties we have signed onto, "Tough luck. We don't agree with it now, therefore we're not doing it." But that's not right; that's not America. That's not the moral foundation on which America was built.

Q: I think we've got a major problem.

WRIGHT: I do too. Big time.

Q: What were you at this time, a lieutenant colonel?

WRIGHT: I was a Major when I was teaching at Fort Bragg and when I went to Grenada.

Q: Who were the people you were training?

WRIGHT: I was training mostly civil affairs and psychological operations officers and non-commissioned officers and Special Forces officers and also military officers from other countries. We had a big, big international education program at Fort Bragg. Most of the civil affairs officers were from the U.S. Army and Marine reserve component units. These reserve officers had civilian jobs as being lawyers, judges, water treatment facilitator all of the skills that you need in a civil affairs unit to deploy to a place like Iraq and help set up a functioning government. We have forty-some-odd civil affairs units in the reserve component. Each unit has about 150 people who in their civilian careers have the professions that we need in order to go to parts of the world. Each unit is designated for a specific geographic region (Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East). Unit members get language training for the specific region. The civil affairs units have some very, very talented, smart people in them.

One of my students in the Civil Affairs School in 1982 is now the current administrator for the Agency for International Development (AID). As a captain in the Army Reserves, Andrew Natsios, was a student in my class. He later became the head of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, and then was the director of the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance for USAID under Bush I. Then when the Democrats came into office, Natsios was out of government for eight years. Then with the new Republican administration he has reappeared as the top person in USAID. He's an ole student and an old friend from work on Somalia, Sierra Leone and most recently Afghanistan.

Q: While you were doing this, why were you thinking of the Foreign Service? You were moving up and I don't know what they were offering you in the Foreign Service but it's almost like going back to "Go" again.

WRIGHT: At that point I wasn't thinking at all about joining the Foreign Service. I was enjoying the military very much. I had deployed to Grenada as a part of the international law team and had seen firsthand how an occupying force goes in and helps a government be reestablished. I enjoyed the experience in Grenada very much. After Grenada, I became the executive officer of the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, the only active duty civil affairs unit that we have in the Army. It is an airborne unit. I had gone through parachute training and was one of the few women in the military that was jump qualified. I was enjoying serving in a leadership position and influencing the careers of many very talented and motivated officers and NCOs. The 96th CA Battalion was a part of virtually every deployment of all the Special Forces units and of the 82nd Airborne Division. Our soldiers were all over the world in the most exciting places and jobs.

But after 18 months, in 1985 I was reassigned to Panama on the J-5 politico-military staff of the U.S. Southern Command.

Q: Before we get there I'd like to go back a bit. Talk about Grenada. There's been much talk about Grenada was sort of a dividing line between realizing?you know, after we did it, that the services didn't work well together and they always talk about having to call Fort Bragg from a pay phone in Grenada in order to talk to the unit down the road a bit. [laughs] How did you find it? What were you doing there?

WRIGHT: I arrived in Grenada on the third day of the operation. I was there to help with international law issues. We had reports of looting by a few of our military units. Items were taken from houses and these items were already reappearing back at Fort Bragg. Since I had been teaching the law of land warfare and the responsibilities of occupying forces to people in the 18th Airborne Corps, the 82nd Airborne Division and Special Forces, the chief lawyer of all of Fort Bragg called me up and said, "Ann, we're getting reports of looting by our troops in Grenada. I need some help on this. Would you deploy to Grenada with us?" "Will you be ready to go to Grenada this afternoon and help get this sorted out?" So I said, "Of course I'll go. I want to go." To go from being a teacher to actually get to do the things that I had been teaching was great!

So within hours I was in Grenada. Unfortunately, some of our junior troops and junior leaders did not remember that not all spoils go to the victor and that somebody's private TV or jewelry that they may have in their jewelry cabinet did not belong to our victorious soldiers. We started searching all of our soldiers as they got on planes taking them back to the U.S. We took from them all sorts of items that we knew they hadn't deployed with and compared the items to the lists of missing items Grenadian citizens had reported.

Another aspect of my work in Grenada was handling the compensation of families who had lost family members in wrongful deaths that had occurred due to U.S. military operations. This is another interesting aspect of what is going on in Afghanistan and in Iraq today.

In Grenada we compensated families when their family members were killed by the U.S. military or by ordnance left by the U.S. military or when private property was destroyed by military action. When I was working in December, January and February, 2002 in Afghanistan, we were trying to get the U.S. government to authorize the payment of wrongful death claims and damages to private property to people in Afghanistan. The USG compensates for a wrongful death using actuarial tables from the country where the death occurred. In general, in most countries, the USG did not have to pay much for wrongful deaths. Unfortunately in Afghanistan, we were unable to get the U.S. government to compensate for wrongful deaths or for damages to private property as we had done in Grenada and in Panama too, I believe. In addition to working on claims from Grenadians, I was involved in a very unique situation.

I became the marriage counselor for the Cuban prisoners-of-war in Grenada! [laughs]

Q: [laughs] Tell me about that.

WRIGHT: We ended up having about a thousand Cubans in our rustic stockade, most of whom had been workers at building the new airport in Grenada. The airport itself was one of the reasons the U.S. government was very concerned about Grenada. The Marxist government that had taken over Grenada had a pact with the Russians, Castro in Cuba, and with Ortega in Nicaragua. The Reagan administration believed Nicaragua, Grenada and Cuba was an "axis of evil" or triangle from which the Soviet Union could launch missiles or aircraft destined for the United States, or to jeopardize the security of the United States. When half of the Marxist government in Grenada murdered the other half of the government, throwing the little island into chaos and with 800 Americans who were at a medical school in Grenada that gave the U.S. justification to intervene to protect the security of our citizens.

The people that were actually building the airport were primarily Cuban civilians. After stiff resistance over a two day period, we captured them and put them in a prisoner-of-war camp. Then all of a sudden we started getting Grenadian ladies who were coming to us saying, "My husband is in your camp. He's a Cuban but we're married," or "My boyfriend is in there and we have a baby that's on the way and I don't want to stay in Grenada because my Grenadian neighbors now are throwing rocks at me because I was consorting with the Cubans." We had five or six cases like this. I became the focal point [laughs] of trying to resolve what was going to happen whether the ladies were going to accompany their boyfriends back to Cuba or whether they would stay in Grenada and face the music from their unsympathetic neighbors. The decision was made that yes, we would send those women who were married back to Cuba with their husbands. Those who were not married asked if we could arrange for them to get married before their boyfriends were shipped to Cuba. So I became the marriage counselor and the finder of a person in Grenada that would actually marry them.

I will never forget the image of the Grenadian court judge wearing his English wig riding out in the back of a Jeep with dust flying, and his clerk carrying the giant register of all marriages of Grenada. We went in to the prisoner-of-war camp and asked for the prisoner grooms to join us. They were in trousers and t-shirt. Their boots had no laces because of security concerns. The Grenadian brides were there in their Sunday best clothing. After the wedding ceremony, we had Coca-Colas and lemon cookies. After thirty minutes of private conversation, we took the brides off the compound until time for the flight to Cuba, via Merida, Mexico. We had one pregnant lady who wanted to go to Cuba with her husband. She ended up having the baby the night before they were to be repatriated to Cuba. We delayed the husband's departure by a day so he could see his newborn child before he flew back to Cuba. We didn't fly the mother and the baby to Cuba because the baby was too young. The wife/mother and baby later paid their way to Cuba. All of the deployments have unexpected events which turn out to be fascinating-being the marriage counselor for the Cubans was definitely unexpected!

Q: When you got in there was the governmental situation really chaotic or was there even a government?

WRIGHT: When I arrived there was no government. Half of the government had been murdered by the other half. We had the murderers in prison. There were no remaining senior government officials. The U.S. military as the occupying force became the de facto government. However, very quickly State Department personnel arrived to assist the transition to USG civilian control. One of my jobs was to be the liaison from the civil affairs unit to the new U.S. Embassy. Larry Rosen, who is now back in Washington after serving as U.S. ambassador to Slovenia, was a junior officer on Barbados at the time. He was helicoptered to Grenada on the first day of the intervention to identify the Governor General of Grenada so we could get him out of harms way. Larry had met the Governor-General in one of his visits to Grenada. No U.S. military could identify the GG. The helicopter that brought Larry in to the GG's compound was hit by gunfire and Larry was wounded in his rear end. Other mid-level State Department officers such as Barbara Owens Kirkpatrick, who recently was our ambassador in Niger, were key players in the U.S. effort in Grenada. Because of my liaison function, I was able to see how a newly formed U.S. Embassy responds to crisis environments. But the U.S. military was in charge of the country and getting all of the essential services such as electrical, water, law enforcement back in operation.

Q: Incidentally, what happened to the soldiers who were found taking unauthorized stuff?

WRIGHT: About fifteen soldiers, including some officers, were court-martialed when they got back to Fort Bragg. We rewrote the training materials used in teaching the law of land warfare in order to provide up to date examples of the responsibilities of occupying powers, of what they could and could not do. We used the examples of looting that took place in Grenada such as soldiers taking out unauthorized weapons. The examples of Grenada were alert soldiers to the things they should not do in Haiti and Panama. I haven't seen recently the training materials for teaching the law of land warfare, but I would hope they have been updated with examples from more recent military operations.

Q: Every war you learn. At least the military goes through and learns; I'm not sure? This is one of the things that in a certain way these oral histories are the only thing that really takes a look at what the State Department did before and have people comment on at least in a record and it's being done unofficially.

WRIGHT: Which is really surprising. Coming from a military background, one of the things I've always been urging the State Department to do is to compile lessons-learned after every incident. They're starting to do some now with the evacuations we have done. I was in charge of the evacuation in 1997 from Sierra Leone. We did a rather extensive after-action report there of the things that went right, as well as the things that went wrong. But I'm not too sure the Department learned much from it. It seems like we're relearning the same lessons, evacuation after evacuation.

Q: We tend to be very good at doing ad hoc things, but the problem is "very good" isn't good enough.

WRIGHT: I'm not so sure we are very good. For example, when we send response teams out for major emergencies, we have to make sure that they've arrive with the right equipment. When you reopen an Embassy like we did in December, 2001 in Kabul, Afghanistan, we must make sure that on the first plane we put iridium phones, laptop computers and printers. We spent three weeks in Afghanistan with no equipment because somebody off-loaded in Germany all the equipment we needed. Then they didn't get right equipment on flights for another week.

Q: In Grenada you say you were attached to the 82nd Airborne Division?

WRIGHT: No, I was with the 18th Airborne Corps, the higher headquarters of the 82nd Airborne Division.

Q: Which includes what, the 101st and the 82nd?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: Which are airborne units and our rapid response teams.

WRIGHT: That's correct.

Q: How did you find parachute training?

WRIGHT: Oh, that was tough. I went through airborne training when I was about fifteen years older than you should. I was in my late thirties when I completed jump school. The best time to do most of your airborne work is in your teens and early twenties [laughs] because the old bones get brittle pretty fast. But I ended up getting through airborne school. I did the basic five qualification jumps but was never assigned to an airborne unit. I've done a little sport jumping too.

Q: But you have to have the credentials in order to?

WRIGHT: Absolutely. If you don't have those airborne wings you might as well not even go to Fort Bragg. Nobody will listen to you at all. So to be a woman, and a senior ranking woman as a major, and to be at Fort Bragg, you needed to have some credentials. The physical training you have to do to get in shape to complete airborne training means a lot in the Fort Bragg military culture. Your credibility isn't based on how smart you are really; it's whether or not you'll jump out of an airplane. [laughs]

Q: Well, tell me something: were you seeing a change in being a woman in the army? We're talking up through '86.

WRIGHT: Yes, there were many more jobs open to women in the 1980s. The Women's Army Corps had been disbanded in 1978 and women now had to go into other non-combat branches of the military such as military intelligence, military police, quartermaster and communications, but none in the combat arms branches.

Q: That would be artillery, infantry and armor.

WRIGHT: That's right. There were no women in those branches. And still we have none in them, although we have women that are in direct combat support units. We have Army helicopter pilots that are in combat missions and we have women in air defense artillery, but not field artillery. No women are in the armor branch. During the early '80s the Army dramatically backtracked on utilization of women. Army planners coded every unit in the Army with a code that attempted to predict where that unit would be during combat operation. This was called the Direct Combat Probability Coding (DCPC). Then Army commanders started moving women out of units that they had been serving successfully in just because a code had been put on the unit saying it was going to be forward in the battle area and might go into combat. Several of us more senior women officers launched a campaign to get the coding turned around. We attended a big meeting in the Pentagon under the auspices of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services where Dr. Larry Korbe, the undersecretary of DOD during the Reagan administration was making a presentation highlighting the great advances in the utilization of women in the military. At that meeting I stood up and said, "Well, Mr. Undersecretary, you may not know it but the Army has decreased a number of units in which women can serve." I can remember vividly that Dr. Korb blanched and went, "Oh, no." He looked down to his advisers sitting on the front row of the auditorium and said, "What do you all know about this? What's the army doing?" The advisers said "We don't know anything about it." So we then shouted from the balcony "We have all the documentation of the unit closures with us. May we meet you in the hallways after session?" I delivered two large notebooks of data to the advisers. After that meeting, the Army had to embark on a two-year study under DOD supervision to determine what units would be where on the battle field. It turned out the original study was quite flawed and meant that ultimately we had many, many, many more units that were open to women. General Norman Schwarzkopf was the deputy of personnel for the Army at the time and was a key officer in the relook of army units. We got to know him quite well after the year-and-a-half second study. We were able to make major headway in the proper utilization of women soldiers.

Q: When I was in Korea, '76 to '79, I remember I think it was General Stillwell saying, "We've got these instructions that if war moves get women away from the thing." He said, "I can't do it because I've got women military police, I've got women truck drivers, I've got women in logistics and there's no way I can do it." Essentially you say, okay, fine. Whatever they say I'll implement this to the best of our ability, but essentially women were going to be right up there because it had been integrated enough at that time so that they couldn't pull them out.

WRIGHT: Absolutely. As we, as women, were saying, we joined the military to pull our share and to earn increased levels of responsibility and to grow in rank. The units where you can get promoted the fastest are the ones that are the leading edge of the battlefield areas. We wanted to be in those units and take the risks and dangers like the men do. We were willing to put our lives on the line and we wanted to do it. It was a purposeful move by certain individuals in the Army to limit where women were going and how in rank they might be promoted. Thank goodness we got that turned around. Some senior officers pushed for greater roles for women in the military including General Jack Singlaub, whose daughter Mary Ann Singlaub was a Foreign Service officer.

Q: He was actually in Korea when I was there. He got in a lot of trouble.

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: But he got off with Carter.

WRIGHT: But he was right.

Q: Oh yes.

WRIGHT: Carter was pushing to reduce the number of U.S. troops in South Korea. General Singlaub said: "We can't reduce the numbers of U.S. military in South Korea and still meet our responsibilities and mission." I can't remember if Singlaub retired in protest of the troop reductions, or if he was fired. But by the end of his administration, Carter recognized that General Singlaub was correct and the troop strength was increased.

Q: Carter was pulling out the Second Division, which wouldn't have made any sense at all.

What about Panama? Were you there during the U.S. intervention or before?

WRIGHT: I served in Panama from '85 to '87. The Panama operation happened in '89. But I was in the region; I was in Nicaragua, actually, at the time that happened. I came back to Panama in '90 to do my two weeks of Army Reserve duty working on civil reconstruction with the civil-military operations center.

Q: Well, let's talk about time in Panama. It was a pretty tense time, wasn't it, for the troops there?

WRIGHT: Yes, it was because we were in negotiations about the U.S. giving back the Panama Canal to the Panamanians. The Panamanians felt the treaty which gave the U.S. such a long lease was signed under duress. The longer the U.S. held the canal the more anti-American demonstrations there were.

Q: But we don't really agree. It was during the Carter administration which would've beewell, he came in '77.

WRIGHT: That's right. During the Carter administration a decision was made to return the canal. There were still anti-American demonstrations going on. (End of tape)

Q: You were saying that you were working on El Salvador issues out of Southern Command. What were you doing?

WRIGHT: The U.S. military was training the Salvadoran military to fight against what they call the rebel forces, the Salvadoran Liberation Front (ESLF), that was a major movement to overthrow that government of El Salvador whom the U.S. supported. U.S. policy makers felt the ESLF was a Communist-led insurgency. There were plenty of allegations and confirmations of terrible human rights abuses by the Salvadoran military and security forces. We put in a lot of Special Forces teams to help train the Salvadoran military. At the same time the CIA was training in Honduras the anti-Sandinista group called the "contras" to go back into Nicaragua to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua that had overthrown the dictator Somoza who had been a "friend" of the U.S. for many years.

During part of this time I was the chief of all civil military operations and civil affairs and humanitarian assistance for the U.S. Southern Command, the military command that oversaw operations in Central and South America. Our J-5 division, or politico-military affairs division, was orchestrating big civic action projects in Honduras to pay off the Honduran government for letting the U.S. government use Honduran territory to train the contras and to deploy the contras from there into Nicaragua. We worked with the Honduran military and the civil government through the U.S. embassy, of course, to create a huge number of civic action projects like road building and construction of school and medical clinics. The road building usually was in very challenging terrain, areas that if it hadn't been for the U.S. military taking on the construction, they still wouldn't have roads in those areas of Honduras.

Q: We were bringing National Guard units in to do the construction.

WRIGHT: That's right. Many National Guard units built roads, schools and clinics. U.S. Air Force "redhorse" construction teams drilled hundreds of wells in areas where women normally walked long distances to polluted rivers to get water for their families. U.S. Army medical units treated thousands of Hondurans. Military veterinarians treated cattle, horses, dogs and any other animals villagers brought in. We had a large civic action program in Honduras and Panama and limited projects in El Salvador. In 1986 we began some humanitarian projects in Bolivia as a part of our anti-drug program.

Q: Were you running across, at this time, reverberations from charges that had been around for a long time that it, the School of the Americas, was training dictators and armies in Latin America how to beat up on civilians and all that?

WRIGHT: Yes. Those charges occurred whenever the military of any country that sent personnel to the School of the Americas committed any criminal acts in the country. The allegations were taken seriously by the Southern Command and investigations were made to determine if any person assigned to the School was teaching techniques that were against the law of land warfare. No techniques of torture or anything like that that were taught there. What was taught was what we were teaching up at Fort Bragg on internal defense and development. It was more of training school in general military topics. The people who were selected to attend the school were bright and well trained. They went back to their militaries and progressed very quickly because they had mastered general military skills. What they did with the position that they gained within their own military depended more on the ethics they had as individuals. The School of the Americas taught military professionalism, legal responsibilities to the civilian population. Some of the people that were trained at the School of the Americas may as individuals have used torture and other illegal techniques against their own citizens, but it certainly was not the policy of the U.S. military to provide any training on those techniques.

Q: My observation of it was that this was just a convenient target of the people who were opposed to the military within the United States and a lot of stories came out which were quite dubious about what they were doing.

WRIGHT: I don't believe that the U.S. trained anybody in those types of techniques.

Q: You were in the Southern Command from when to when?

WRIGHT: From 1985 to 1987.

Q: Were relations with Noriega getting very bad by that time?

WRIGHT: Yes, they were tense. There were confrontations between Panamanian military and U.S. troops. The Panamanian military was very aggressive toward the Panamanian people as well and that was worrisome.

Q: There was something I didn't ask. Going back to Grenada, what was your feeling and that of the people around you? Was our intervention there justified or not, do you think?

WRIGHT: I think it was justified in terms of protecting the lives of our American citizens that were in Grenada. After one part of the government murdered the other part in the most brutal, brutal fashion lining up people against a wall and then machine gunning them down and then machine gunning people that were jumping off the walls of a fort trying to get away from this terrible mess that was going on, there was reason for concern for the safety of U.S. citizens. If you use the theory that you can intervene in other countries to protect the lives of your own citizens that was certainly one that I fully believe in. The head of the East Caribbean countries - the prime minister of Dominica?

Q: I can't remember her name.

WRIGHT: Lady Eugenia Charles made a request from the regional organization for the U.S. to intervene. However, I think our troops were already on the ground when that happened. The Reagan administration flew her up to Washington and she made the request on television. A few members of the Jamaica government, and of course the Cuban government, didn't like the request, but the other nations of the regional organization approved the request.

Q: Margaret Thatcher got annoyed. I think maybe because she wasn't in the decision loop or something.

WRIGHT: The intervention happened so quickly. I can remember it vividly because I was the duty officer for the Special Operations Command that day. We were monitoring the movement of the U.S. Naval Task Force that had left Norfolk, Virginia for Beirut, Lebanon. The previous week, the Marine barracks had been blown up in Beirut 200 people killed. As the Naval Task Force left the East Coast, all of a sudden the Grenadian government imploded. The Task Force detoured to Grenada and became the platform from which the U.S. intervention deployed. Operation Urgent Fury was completed faster than the Brits could get over there to do anything. I think Margaret Thatcher's nose may have been out of shape because things happened so quickly that we really didn't do much consultation. But the vast majority of Grenadians were thrilled that we were there.

Q: Well, that New Jewel movement was very peculiar and turned out to be nasty.

WRIGHT: Indeed it did. The New Jewel movement became allied with the Soviet block and was taught many techniques of control of the civilian population such as jailing and torture of anyone who dared dissent. Lots of bad things happened on that small little nation of, at that time, less than 100,000 people.

Q: In Panama were you caught up in the?this was the time when the Reagan administration was going all out to try to get rid of the Sandinistas and you had particularly what passes for the left in the United States the glitterati in Hollywood and elsewhere were taking the Sandinista side. Did this have any concern within the military?

WRIGHT: Not really. I think in general our military was pretty well convinced that there was a threat. The conspiracy theory that there were Communists all over the region was strongly held. We felt Soviet sponsored groups in El Salvador and Nicaragua did pose a threat to the region, and that next Soviet sponsored groups would be Honduras and then Guatemala and Mexico would be in jeopardy. Finally these groups would be up to the southern border of the United States. They needed to be stopped right. And I was part of that. I felt that it was appropriate for us to be trying to limit the movement of those groups that were causing such havoc in their own countries, that were blowing up all sorts of places, and that were really marauding on the common person of the country.

Q: Did you get a feeling that you were in a play in which you really didn't know the plot? Because we had a lot of different elements, including particularly the Ollie North and the Iran-Contra affair was going on. Did you get some of that feeling?

WRIGHT: Oh, absolutely. None of us felt that we had the whole picture. The Washington Post would have articles that would make you wonder why certain thing was happening. There were certain people in our intelligence sections that had a much clearer picture of what was going on. Because of the compartmentalization and the need-to-know, I, in the civil affairs and civic action part, didn't need to know and shouldn't have known all of the aspects of what was going on in Honduras. My part was you just get the roads built and make the Hondurans happy. Do whatever it takes to get it done. If they want to build a road straight up and vertical, get it done. We all knew that the CIA was involved in the training of the Contras and knew that training was going on in Honduras, but we were told to stay clear of their training areas in our civic action activities.

But I didn't know all the ins-and-outs of what was going on in the training. Ollie North's project to sell weapons to Iran to get money to give to finance the training and equipping of the contras to fight against the Sandinistas was known to only a few in the White House and Pentagon. Admiral Poindexter, the National Security Adviser, and North knew what was happening, but they weren't advertising it.

Q: In the civil action projects who was calling the shots as far as the value of a program?

WRIGHT: It was primarily SOUTHCOM (Southern Command). It wasn't the U.S. Embassy in Honduras. In fact, we had some tiffs with the Embassy over which projects should be done. We would have military planning conferences with the military of Honduras and we would invite the embassy folks to come over the AID folks and the political section but many times they wouldn't show up. Now looking at it from the embassy's point of view I can sure see why. From the embassy's perspective (but not necessarily from other agencies viewpoint, the ambassador is the president's representative and directs all U.S. operations to include military. The military was unilaterally calling meetings to talk with the Honduran government primarily the military, but the military was making a lot of decisions in the civil government. The Honduran military was making the decisions on which roads would be built, which clinics and schools would be constructed. After the fact, our U.S. military delegations would inform the embassy, "These were the decisions that have been made. This is the amount of money that we can spend. We can do these projects," and "That's that." The embassy didn't have much of a say in what projects were done. Of course, that's not the way the decision should have been made, but that's the way it was happening then. You can see the same parallel in Iraq right now where you had the DOD appointing? well, a lot of bloodletting here in Washington between State and DOD, but DOD won initially in being able to set up the office of reconstruction under DOD. But in today's paper now you see that there's a pulling back of that to an extent.

Q: I think the relations have not been that good at the top.

So from SOUTHCOM where did you go?

WRIGHT: By the end of my tour, I was a senior lieutenant colonel. I wanted to go into the defense attaché½ program to be an intelligence officer for the U.S. Army and serve in embassies and work with the militaries of the host country. Since I was a Latin American Foreign Area officer and had served three years in Latin America, it seemed obvious to me that I could be a defense attaché½ in Latin America. I submitted my application for the program and got back a terse comment from the Department of the Army saying, "We have no women in the defense attaché½ program; it is closed to women." So I sent back a question, "Why is it closed to women?" The response: Because women cannot work well with the macho men of the militaries of Latin America." So I sent back my message: "I just completed three years of working those macho guys. I get along fine with them. I can get lots done with them." General Galvin, the four-star commander of SOUTHCOM, sent a cable to the Army "This senior lieutenant colonel is one of the best officers I have in my command. I would trust her with anything. She can certainly do the work of a defense attaché½ in any embassy in Latin America," and "Open that program to her." And the Department of the Army responded, "General, I'm sorry. Maybe you didn't understand us, but this program is closed to women."

About that time, I received a notice from the State Department saying that the class action lawsuit that was filed against the State Department was settled out of court and the first seventy-five women who can pass the department's oral assessment would be taken into the Foreign Service." I took the oral assessment and passed it and decided to try a new career.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions that were asked?

WRIGHT: No, not really. It was a grueling one day filled with the standard format of oral assessment tortures. After I passed the oral assessment, I requested release from active duty from the army and went back into the reserve component. I then started my new career as a junior officer in the Foreign Service at my advanced age. [laughs]

Q: How old were you?

WRIGHT: I was forty when I came in the Foreign Service.

Q: So we'll pick this up the next time in 1987 when you came into the Foreign Service from being a lieutenant colonel to being a?

WRIGHT: Second lieutenant. [laughs]

Q: Okay, Ann, you're a forty year-old second lieutenant. [laughs] I mean FSO-8, I guess. You probably came in as a -7, did you?

WRIGHT: No, if you were in government service when you were accepted, they tried to match your salary as long as it no higher than an -04 salary; an -04 was the top that you could come in as a junior officer. So I maxed out at the top of the -04 level.

Q: Was there an A-100 course, a junior officer course that you came in with?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: Looking at it, what was the composition of it and how did you find that?

WRIGHT: I was pleased to find that I was not the oldest person in the class. We had quite a number of people that were moving from one career to another. I think we had fifty people in that A-100 class and I would say at least fifteen of us were in second careers and in their late thirties or early forties. One woman was perhaps fifty-five when she came in.

Q: When you came in how did they treat you as far as where did you want to go and what sort of work did you want to do?

WRIGHT: At that time we still had the program where you already had been designated to go into a cone when you came in. I was in the political cone. The first assignment was going to be at least partially consular but I did get one of the rotational positions that gave you one year in consular and one year in political. There wasn't really much concern for your desires on the type of job and location of your first assignment. But I'd say maybe thirty percent of the people got the kind of the job that they had hoped for. But as things play out with the Foreign Service, nothing is in concrete. My original assignment was to go to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. I wasn't thrilled with the assignment as nothing extraordinary was happening there compared to countries in Central America. I was in Spanish language review when a vacancy opened up in Nicaragua. That was a much more interesting place and timewith the contras fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. And with my recent military experience in Central America that was certainly a place that I was most interested in going to. So it ended up that I got to go to a place that I really wanted to.

Q: So you were in Managua from when to when?

WRIGHT: From '87 to '89.

Q: What was your position there?

WRIGHT: The first year I was a consular officer and the second year I was to go into the political section. The rotation from consular to political officer occurred earlier than was scheduled because one-half of the embassy staff was declared personas non-grata (PNGed) by the Sandinistas for U.S. Embassy "support" for the newly formed political opposition to the Sandinistas. Virtually all the senior staff of the embassy was kicked out of the country, and all of a sudden the three junior officers that were there became three senior officers. [laughs]

Q: Who was the ambassador when you arrived?

WRIGHT: We did not have an ambassador. We had a Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Later, Ambassador Melton arrived and lasted only a short time until the Sandinistas declared him persona non-grata. After Ambassador Melton left, Jack Leonard was sent in as the Charge. Jack later became the Director of Central American regional office and then headed up Cuban affairs before he retired.

Q: What was the state of relations with Nicaragua when you arrived there in 1987?

WRIGHT: It was a very difficult relationship. The U.S. was financing the contras who were fighting against the Sandinistas. The contras were being trained by the CIA in Honduras and being sent across the border to fight the Sandinistas. So when I first arrived there it was very, very tense. The relationship between the Sandinista security force and members of our embassy staff was tough. Every time we would go out of the embassy or out of our residences we were followed, our telephones were tapped when you picked up the telephone you knew the intelligence people were in the background listening. Sometimes they would sneeze or even talk to you. [laughs] They wanted to let you know that they were watching your every movement and hearing what you said.

Q: What were you doing in consular work there?

WRIGHT: That was a fascinating and tragic time for consular work. We interviewed thousands of young Nicaraguan men who did not want to serve in the Sandinista military. They wanted a visa to scoot out of Nicaragua and go to the U.S. and wait out the war there. They didn't necessarily want to be in the contras either; they just didn't want to be a part of the war at all. And many families wanted to get their whole families out. Every consular day was very difficult because you sympathized with the plight of the people that wanted to leave. They didn't want to be in the crossfire of the contras and the Sandinistas. They didn't want to live under the tyranny of the Sandinistas. The tyranny of course continuing in the visa line because they would have to pass through the Sandinista police to even get into the consulate to be interviewed. So it was a real drain on you as a consular officer to face these people who just wanted to escape violence.

Q: What were your instructions? How did you deal with these people who were trying to get the hell out?

WRIGHT: The general instructions were that just because a person did not want to serve in the Sandinista military did not make a person a qualified non-immigrant visa applicant. So you didn't issue a visa to the U.S. to those who said they didn't want to serve in the Sandinista military. What was so interesting though was that if a person could get from Nicaragua illegally into the United States, he could then apply for political asylum once they got in there. He couldn't apply for political asylum outside of the United States, but if he could get into the U.S. legally or illegally then he could apply for it. So all they were essentially asking us was to help get them to get to the U.S. cheaply, safely and quickly with a visa so they could fly to the U.S. rather than paying a coyote \$3000 and the dangerous trip through Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico taking three weeks. Once they got to the U.S. they could take care of themselves as they knew how the system worked.

Q: Were you able to do something at the margins? You know, looking up and trying to figure out reasons for giving somebody a visa.

WRIGHT: Yes. There was a certain amount of that that certainly did go on. If we could be convinced that a particular person really was in imminent danger, if they could portray that to us, then there were many visas issued on that basis. But you also had to be very careful because you didn't know if some of the young folks might be Sandinista agents that were just using that as a way to get to the States and then wreck a little havoc within the Nicaraguan community in the United States. As all consular decisions are, it was pretty much a gut feeling of what you felt was right in that particular case.

Q: Were you by yourself or were there others with you?

WRIGHT: No, thank god there were others [laughs] because to do that by yourself would've been just torture. You certainly need the comradeship and the advice of other consular officers.

Q: I was going to say, you almost have to go into something collegially to share the burden.

WRIGHT: You certainly did. Some days you could handle it very well and you could make your decisions and do it quickly and feel good about them. Other days you'd have a very difficult time; if you had a case that really did bother you and you knew the problems that the family was having, or the person was having, but for some reason you just didn't feel you could issue the visa, you felt badly about that. So you needed the comfort of the other consular officers who hopefully were having a little bit better day than you were having. But what was so interesting too was that of course the applicants could tell in the first thirty minutes the word would go back through the lines; as people would be coming out they would say to the other people in line, "Well, try not to get in the line with the blonde-headed woman because she's not in a good mood today," or "The black-headed guy is a real bear." And you could see this start about an hour into the interviewing process. All of a sudden long lines would be forming in front of one person's window and we'd look out into the waiting area at the lines and then at each other and laugh. Sometimes we would have to go out into the waiting room and physically move people into the lines that were not full, much to the displeasure of the applicants. At that time, there was no fee to be interviewed so people would come several times a week hoping they would be lucky.

Q: Were you getting much in the way of suggestions, support from the visa office and all, or were they kind of leaving it to you?

WRIGHT: Pretty much leaving it to us although of course we did have to send back to Washington for advisory opinions on some people. If you got certain categories of people in, and through the name checks, there was definite guidance particularly for Sandinista government officials. But for the average Nicaraguan it was left up to us. We scoured the local newspapers to keep track of what persons were allegedly doing human rights violations, etc to help us do our job in the best way possible.

Q: How about the Nicaraguan Foreign Service nationals (FSNs); how helpful were they?

WRIGHT: They were very helpful. They were dedicated, tough people who had to endure a lot of harassment from the Sandinistas for working with the U.S. Embassy. We had instances, at various times, of our FSNs being arrested, being put in jail, being humiliated. It was a very, very difficult time for them. But they, in their own way, could indicate to us if they knew anything about a visa applicant. But then, as in virtually all areas where you have conditions of political strife in the country, or great economic stress, they too kind of have to watch their backs because the word out on the street is that the Foreign Service national staff runs things. If you can get them on your side, or one person in that consulate, then you've got a better chance of getting a visa. Of course we have had, in the history of all of our consular operations, enough times that people have been bribed and succumbed to the temptations of money, or threats of intimidation, threats of physical violence for us to always to on the lookout for FSNs that were not doing their jobs properly.

Q: Did you have much of a social life with the Nicaraguans? Particularly the time you were in the consular section.

WRIGHT: [laughs] that usually is the greatest social activity of any Foreign Service officer's career, when you're the consular officer.

Q: Everybody wants to know you.

WRIGHT: That's for sure. You get more invitations than you will have in the rest of your career! The first week or two when all of the invitations come in, you think, my goodness, how friendly everybody is. Then when you go to one of the social events, the first question or first comment out of virtually every person's mouth is dealing with a visa issue for themselves or some family members. Pretty soon you get jaded. But yes, the social scene in Nicaragua was remarkably vibrant considering that they faced the brunt of the Sandinistas to be seen with Americans. Certainly not all of the contacts were just for visas. There were a lot of Nicaraguans that became good friends. We would go to their homes for parties and to their rustic beach houses on the Pacific shore.

Q: From your take the whole time you were there, did you get a feeling that the Sandinistathe leadership and those identified with the Sandinistastood apart from most Nicaraguans or not?

WRIGHT: Yes, by that time the Sandinista leadership was standing far apart from ordinary Nicaraguans. In the early days of the Sandinista revolution against the Somoza government, the Sandinistas called themselves part of the people and I think at that stage were a part. But the longer they stayed in power, the more corrupt the power became. At that point there was an ever-growing distance between the society and the senior leadership of the Sandinistas.

Q: What happened when about halfway through? When you were there, a lot of people got declared persona non grata?

WRIGHT: Yes, indeed.

Q: Was there anything that caused it?

WRIGHT: Yes, by that time a deal had been cut between the U.S. government and the Sandinistas. If the U.S. would stop the support for the contras then the Sandinistas would agree to hold elections. The Sandinistas allowed political opposition parties to form and to begin campaigning in Nicaragua. Once that agreement was made it seemed like every Nicaraguan formed his own political party. If I remember right, there was something like twenty-five political parties that formed. Many of the political parties were paid for and supported with U.S. funds. We did not pay the parties through the embassy. Leaders of the parties traveled to other places where they were bankrolled. As a result political opposition politics was a growth industry. The creation of political parties and the political campaigning that then started at the grass roots level was fascinating because it's the first time that had ever happened in that country. Prior to the Sandinistas the dictator Somoza was pretty heavy-handed and had no political dialogue with the people. So this was the first chance the Nicaraguans had had to actually try this thing called democracy, to see if they could defeat the Sandinistas so that there could be a democratic form of government started.

As the party formed and many events held by each party throughout the country, the Sandinistas were shocked at the amount of support that was out in the countryside for the opposition parties. The political rallies were large. The larger they got then the bolder members of the groups became. At one particular place called Naidame, if I remember right, six opposition parties had a combined campaign one Saturday afternoon. As the leaders of the parties were speaking in the city square, Sandinista police started creeping up into the alleyways surrounding the square. When the people saw the Sandinista police coming in they started throwing rocks at them. Well, they rocked the police really, really hard. The police were wounded badly and of course the Sandinistas could not put up "civil disobedience" and they threw in jail the top leaders of six of the parties, including like a seventy-year-old woman who was one of the most dynamic of all of the opposition leaders. They threw them in jail and then they said that it was the U.S. embassy that was behind all of the "civil disobedience" and then tossed out one-half of our embassy staff, including most senior officers.

Q: What did the embassy do then?

WRIGHT: We reorganized the remaining embassy staff. We closed the consulate and the three junior officers moved over to the political and economic sections to take the places of the senior political and economic officers that had been PNGed. That was an exciting time. We worked extremely hard to provide Washington with information on what was happening in Nicaragua during this very sensitive period. Besides kicking out half of our staff, the Sandinistas put a travel restriction on the remaining staff. They said that if any remaining embassy member left Nicaragua they would not be given a reentry visa prior to leaving. The Sandinistas required that Embassy staff members who left had to apply for readmission to Nicaragua after we got to the U.S. The Nicaraguan embassy in Washington took at least three weeks to process our requests for readmission. That Sandinista policy meant that those of us that we left were stuck in Nicaragua as we had no one to replace us. It was a very, very difficult time. But at the same time, it was a great challenge for us junior folks to be able to move right in to more senior positions.

Q: What were you doing when you were doing political work? How were your contacts? What were you seeing developing there?

WRIGHT: I was the political officer that was the liaison with the twenty-five political parties. I tried to meet with the leaders of the parties at least once a week to find out what their plans were for the upcoming weekend and the following week. It was fascinating to see how some of the parties were really trying to organize themselves as a grass roots movement similar to what we have in the U.S. While others were just working the system to get funding but weren't so much interested in doing the things needed to develop a strong political base and be the part of the opposition that was ultimately chosen to stand the election against the Sandinistas.

Q: In a way I think this could be tricky because I'm sure there were elements in the United States, for example a union or a political action group or something would be supporting one of these opportunistic parties and all and get identified with them. Were we able to say, "Don't play with this group. It's not for real."?

WRIGHT: We didn't have many groups that were trying to make contact with the various opposition political parties in Nicaragua. I think part of it may have been that they knew they could still get thrown in jail by the Sandinistas if they personally arrived there. Some of the opposition leaders would go to the U.S. and meet with some of these organizations.

Q: Were you personally harassed when you did this sort of thing?

WRIGHT: Oh yes. Being blonde-headed in Nicaragua, or any Latin American country, you stand out. So it was easy to identify the American woman political officer from the embassy in the crowd when I would attend Sandinista rallies or political opposition rallies. Sandinista security service personnel were always close by. Sometimes they would be aggressive to make sure I knew they were around. Sometimes you got pushed around a little bit.

Q: In a practical sense they weren't going to beat you up or anything like that?

WRIGHT: No, I didn't feel that they would do that but they certainly did want to let you know that they were watching every person you spoke with and every movement you made.

Q: Were you all sensing an increasing shrillness or something in what the Sandinistas were doing as they became aware that...I mean, this was supposed to be a walkover for them and they agreed to this thing and all of a sudden they found it was their worst nightmare. [laughs]

WRIGHT: Indeed.

Q: Did you see a change as they became?

WRIGHT: Yes. As more and more Nicaraguans began attending the opposition rallies, the Sandinista leadership became concerned. Their concern changed into action with they jailed six key opposition leaders. Once the opposition leaders went into jail, then there was an international outcry, "How could you throw these people into jail?" The Sandinistas were fighting on all fronts in an international public relations campaign to show that they had the right to classify opposition leaders as organizers of "civil disobedience" who were breaking the laws of Nicaragua by inciting their followers to attack the Sandinista police.

Q: Within the embassy from early on why did the Sandinistas sort of sign on to this election business?

WRIGHT: Because they were sufficiently frightened about being beaten militarily by the contras. The U.S. had spent a lot of money and had trained a lot of Nicaraguans to fight the Sandinistas. There was enough military pressure that they ultimately decided that they would agree to hold the elections.

Q: Did you get to meet any of the Ortegas or any of the others?

WRIGHT: I met Daniel Ortega only once in the two years I was in Nicaragua. In late 1989 I accompanied Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd's Congressional delegation to a meeting with Ortega. Dodd didn't want any U.S. embassy staff to go to the meeting, but we underscored the need for the embassy to know what Ortega said during the meeting. The Sandinistas would not agree that our Charge d'Affaires could attend the meeting. I as a junior member of the embassy staff was allowed to attend. (End of tape)

Q: Was there much of a Cuban presence or a Soviet presence when you were there?

WRIGHT: Yes, there were both. They both had large embassies. We had very little dealings with them except at the monthly diplomatic social gatherings. We could not meet in any other venue and we had to be careful in the social gatherings.

Q: Early on, when the Sandinistas first came to power after overthrowing Somoza, they became the darlings of the left and the intelligencia around the world, including sort of the glitterati of Hollywood and all this. By the time you got there had that died down? Was there much of sort of leftist French types or Americans and that?

WRIGHT: It had pretty well died down because of the brutality of the Sandinistas toward many Nicaraguans. Their earlier claim of doing more for the people of Nicaragua in education and health than Somoza did was the central reason why so many people initially supported them. Somoza and his gang were not good to the people of Nicaragua either. The Sandinistas, in the early days, did provide better education and better healthcare. But as their political rule became more and more oppressive and there was no opportunity for dialogue and discussion with people who did not agree with all of the themes that the Sandinistas had, then the shine wore off of them. There were some terrible cases of brutality by the Sandinista security service.

Q: In what manner?

WRIGHT: There were elements of the Catholic Church that were quite supportive of the Sandinistas, the liberation theology group. But the Archbishop of Nicaragua spoke out strongly against the treatment of Nicaraguans by the Sandinistas. The arch bishop subsequently was paraded naked through the streets of Managua by the Sandinista security forces.

Q: Good god.

WRIGHT: Yes. So when that sort of heavy-handedness started, the shine really was wearing off the Sandinistas, I think, to the glitterati. Senator Christopher Dodd was accompanied by Bianca Jagger, Mick Jagger's former wife, who was a Nicaraguan. I ended up seeing her again fifteen years later in Kabul, Afghanistan where she was investigating whether her NGO could help Afghan children.

Q: Well, at one point, when the Reagan group came in the election of 1980 and they got very heavily involved in the contras and all of this and it was quite controversial; it was almost Republicans versus Democrats or something of that nature. I'm thinking by the time you got there the landscape had changed a bit. One, the contras were having an effect, and two, the Sandinistas were the nice liberal types that people thought.

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: Had that sort of changed the feelings by yourself and others in the embassy too?

WRIGHT: Yes. From serving in the embassy and living in Nicaragua and hearing the stories from Nicaraguans of the heavy-handedness of the Sandinistas, it was quite apparent to us that the good part of what the Sandinistas had tried to do on education and health was torpedoed by their extreme security measures. In the early days when the contras were created, there was certainly a big outcry in the United States questioning why the U.S. should be funding a group to overthrow the Sandinista government. It's all reminiscent of what we have twenty years later with protests of the U.S. removing Saddam Hussein in Iraq. And some of the same U.S. political figures have reappeared - Elliot Abram who was the assistant secretary of state for Latin America - who's now reappeared in the Bush administration working on the Middle East.

Q: By the time you got to doing this had the Ollie North business more or less been over? The expose?

WRIGHT: It had already unfolded. In fact, I remember being here in Washington in the summer of 1987 before going to Nicaragua and watching the hearings in the Congress with Ollie North testifying. The admission that North and Poindexter had arranged arms sales to Iran to get money to fund the Contras was out in the public. That did, I think, undermine the credibility of the whole contra operation. But as much as one disapproves of how North got the funding for the contras, the effect of it was that the Contras had applied sufficient pressure on the Sandinistas that they agreed to holding elections.

Q: Was anybody from the embassy going out and looking at how the Contras were behaving, and the Sandinistas, during this time?

WRIGHT: No. The embassy itself was not involved with the Contras in any way. We were prohibited from traveling into the border areas where most of the fighting was going on. The CIA was in charge of that operation, but not our CIA station in Nicaragua.

Q: Were you there during the election?

WRIGHT: No, I left just before the elections. I followed the elections from my new post in Grenada. The lead-up to the election was fascinating because the twenty-five political parties were vying to have their presidential candidate selected to be the candidate of the opposition to stand against the Sandinistas. There was a great bitter fight among three or four opposition leaders. I remember being in Nicaragua when the twenty-four hour marathon among all the opposition parties was taking place to determine who was going to be the opposition's candidate. Neither one of the three male candidates won; it was the compromise candidate woman, Dona Violeta Chamorro, the wife of an assassinated newspaperman, who was the person put forward to stand against Daniel Ortega. We had had lots of contacts with her over the years. Her family was quite fascinating because she had four adult children. Two were Sandinistas and two were opposition.

She was an elegant lady and certainly knowledgeable about everything happening in Nicaragua. But we had our doubts as to her ability to manage a political campaign against the Sandinistas, and then what if she won? What would happen then? She had not been the driving force in the newspaper after her husband was assassinated; that job fell to one of her sons. If she won, would she be able to manage the country? We were all keeping our fingers crossed that somehow she would be able to rise to the occasion. She certainly did in a very valiant way. She defeated Daniel Ortega and then served as President of Nicaragua for a four-year term. She was an excellent person on the international level to go out and talk about the need for the international community to help Nicaragua at this critical time in its history. She had major challenges trying to organize the first democratic institutions in the country.

Q: You say you left there in '89.

WRIGHT: Yes, in late '89. I left just before another set of PNGing took place, right before the elections. Our embassy was cut from half down to a third. [laughs] There weren't a lot of people in the embassy when the election actually took place.

Q: What caused that? For the uninitiated, PNGing is a short-cut for someone being declared persona non grata; in other words, being kicked out of the country.

WRIGHT: You know, I can't really remember exactly what the cause was. I was already in Grenada at the time and remember hearing on the radio that the Sandinistas had kicked out another fifteen people. Our GSO (General Services Officer) got to stay, our regional security officer and a few others, it was a lean and mean group that remained. I'll have to go back and find out exactly what happened, but no doubt yet one more allegation that the embassy staff was doing something inappropriate with the opposition.

Q: While you were there, were all of you under embassy constraints to be careful not to do something that's going to give the Sandinistas an opportunity to claim that you were interfering?

WRIGHT: Yes, absolutely. For example, when I would go out to attend the opposition rallies, I would not be doing this single-handedly. There would be a security officer that would be with me. Everybody would know that I was on official business. But in the eyes of the Sandinistas my official business was pretty questionable from their point of view. The U.S. government programs and policies were undermining their authority in Nicaragua. But since they'd already signed the agreement that they would let elections take place they had gotten themselves in a corner. But they didn't go down fighting without a few punches to the embassy.

Q: What brought about in '89 your movement over to Grenada?

WRIGHT: A very tragic incident had happened in Grenada. Our one political officer in the very small embassy in Grenada had been killed. He was sitting in the office of the commissioner of police office discussing allegations of corruption of an assistant commissioner of police. We felt the assistant commissioner had diverted some U.S. government funds that were to be used for police training. Our political officer was talking to the commissioner of police about this when the assistant commissioner came in and shot and killed the commissioner of police and our political officer. The embassy administrative officer was also in the room and was able to dive behind a desk and was not shot. Our political officer was killed and they needed someone in there pretty quickly. I had served in Grenada seven years before when I was in the military during the U.S. intervention in 1983. So I knew everybody in Grenada. I was just finishing my two-year assignment in Nicaragua, my first tour, so they asked if I would go over to Grenada quickly to help.

Q: So you were in Grenada from December '89 to when?

WRIGHT: Until July, 1991 when I went to the Naval War College.

Q: What was the situation on Grenada when you went back there?

WRIGHT: The intervention by the U.S. in '83 had allowed the people of Grenada to choose its own government and to be without the influences of some very difficult people who had been ruling the country under the New Jewel movement, a "revolutionary Marxist" group that had held power from '79. They had thrown out the long time Prime Minister, a strange character, Sir Eric Gairy, who was known throughout the world for first address to the United Nations in which he talked about his strange visions of UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects). [laughs]

Gairy was a dictator who had his own gang of thugs that beat up and murdered those who disagreed with him, similar to the way Somoza in Nicaragua did. The New Jewel movement overthrew him and then started out just like the Sandinistas with education and the health reforms and doing more for the people than had been done in quite a while. But they, too, developed aggressive tactics toward their own people. A lot of people disappeared or were beaten up; some disappeared, some murdered. The New Jewel movement split into two elements. One group murdered thirteen of their former colleagues and triggered chaos in Grenada. The U.S. intervened to protect the lives of 800 U.S. medical students that were attending an off-shore medical school in Grenada. After the intervention there was a six- or eight-month interim government followed by elections. Since 1984, there have been elections on a regular timetable and a turnover of power on a democratic model.

Q: Essentially you were going into, aside of the fact that you had to worry about disgruntled, corrupt people shooting political officers, this was a stable situation?

WRIGHT: Yes, Grenada was stable. You could see that there had been much political and economic progress. Economic progress was moving more slowly than political process as would happen in a small Caribbean country. Economic progress in a country of less than a hundred thousand people is difficult when the country must run all aspects of a nation, plus attracting a sufficient number of tourists to spend big bucks to generate the revenues that you need to run a country.

Q: In the first place, what do we have there? Do we have a regular embassy?

WRIGHT: Yes, we have an embassy, but no resident Ambassador. We have a Charge d'Affaires under the Embassy in Bridgetown, Barbados.

Q: But when you were there, who was the ambassador?

WRIGHT: When I was there, the embassy was not under our embassy in Barbados. We did not have an ambassador but a Charge d'Affaires named Ford Cooper.

Q: So you must've got to know every voter on the island practically.

WRIGHT: I knew most everyone on the island from my military days there. My job in the military had been on an international law team that investigated claims against the U.S. forces for damages done to properties. So I met many Grenadians when they would come to us to tell us what damages their house had suffered or their banana trees had suffered from military operations. I became known as the person with the money so everybody in town knew me as Major Ann. Returning seven years later with the embassy certainly people remembered me well.

Q: From a practical point of view, outside of the fact that if you're a political officer you're reporting on the politics of the country, was there any particular issue or interest in what was happening there?

WRIGHT: One of the challenges left from 1983 was for the government of Grenada to determine what should be done with the people who had murdered one half of the government seven years before. Those people were still in a little tiny prison in Grenada. The initial judicial process convicted most of them of murder and sentenced them to death by hanging. Seven years later the appellate process for the convicted was the focus of the Caribbean on whether or not the regional courts of appeal were going to uphold the decision of the lower court to keep these people in solitary confinement until a final ruling on whether they would be put to death. They were held in a typical Caribbean prison which isn't much to write home about. So one of my jobs as political officer was to go into the prison to make sure that we could report accurately on the conditions they were held under. There were groups in the region, particularly Jamaica and Cuba, who felt that they should not be in jail. They had supported that element of the New Jewel movement and were always expressing concern about the conditions in the prison. There was enough of a possibility of an attempt to break them out of the lightly-guarded prison that we were able to get Diplomatic Security's anti-terrorism program in the early '90s to do some training of prison guards to upgrade the security. That was the main focus on the political side.

Q: Cuba had been involved in building a landing strip. Was Cuba still messing around there or not much?

WRIGHT: No, the Cubans had been kicked out in 1983 and had not returned in 1989. But how times change. I was in Grenada in August, 2003 and the Cubans now have an embassy in Grenada and have a larger academic exchange program for Grenadians than does the United States. The Cuba government provides scholarships for Grenadians to study a variety of subjects in Cuba. The Cubans even provide medical scholarships for American citizens who can not afford U.S. medical schools to go to medical school in Cuba.

Q: Then you left there in 1990 to go to the Naval War College?

WRIGHT: That's right.

Q: I can't remember had you been to the war college before?

WRIGHT: No. I was selected to go to the Naval War College as a U.S. Army Reserve Officer, not as a Foreign Service officer. I went on leave without pay from the Foreign Service to attend. I was a colonel in the army reserves and eligible to attend the war college. The Army Reserves selects fourteen lieutenant colonels and colonels each year to go to the various war colleges as a reserve officer. I had been selected as one of the fourteen from the entire army reserves. I was still a junior officer in the Foreign Service so I had to put in my request to go on leave without pay to attend an educational opportunity that normally doesn't come to a Foreign Service officer until they're in their fifteenth or sixteenth year in the Foreign Service.

I and the Foreign Service had a little bit of a squabble on my request for leave without pay to attend the school. The first round they disapproved my request for leave without pay because it was "inappropriate" for a junior officer to be going to the school. So I had to go back and battle with them. I said: "Well, if you don't let me go I'll have to resign because I've been longer with the U.S. military than I have been with the Foreign Service only three years of Foreign Service and I can always go back into the military and get paid as a colonel versus a junior officer." That comment seemed to hold some sway with them, so the second time the answer came back that, "Yes, you can go on leave without pay."

Q: So you were at the Naval War College. Where is that located?

WRIGHT: In Newport, Rhode Island.

Q: How did you find that year?

WRIGHT: Oh that was excellent, a fine year. At that time that Naval War College was the only war college that awarded a master's degree. Subsequently both the National War College and the Army War College now award master's degrees, but at the time the Naval War College was the only one. It had a rigorous academic program, but not so rigorous that you didn't have time to do a lot of things that you can't do while you're full-time either in the military or in the Foreign Service. So it was a great year. It was academically challenging with tremendous international speakers. It was great to be around military officers from all the services and international officers from thirty countries. We also had one Foreign Service officer that had been assigned there for senior service training.

Q: The navy is sort of a unique institution and has a unique way of looking at things and all of that, and one of them being that since they're at sea a lot allegedly many of their top commanders don't understand the complexities of trying to deal with civilian populations and all of this, which they're faced with it all the time. Did you find you were sort of a source of information and trying to adjust particularly to naval people, to the realities of dealing in a civilian world?

WRIGHT: Yes. There definitely is that conflict, although not as striking as one would think. The naval officers, by the time they go to the Naval War College, have been in the military for eighteen years or so and have had a broad range of experiences. I think some of it is hype that they themselves carry on what we may perceive to be that attitude just because it's in the navy tradition. But the naval officers are all very well educated and certainly know the complexities of war. Although they are generally off-shore, they certainly know the impact of what the Army does on the land. It was good for there to be a large sprinkling of army, air force and marine officers and State Department officers to provide the realities of what goes in war on the ground.

Q: Yes. The navy is the same is true for the air force. They're kind of away from people.

WRIGHT: Yes. It was good to be able to talk to air force officers about things we in the Army see on the ground - the realities of unexploded ordnance and mines dropped from aircraft, mines that stay active for years.

Q: Yes, because this is a major issue in Nicaragua.

WRIGHT: Yes. A lot of mines were placed on the Nicaraguan border by both the contras and Sandinistas. Mines were killing civilians who lived in the border area. We also had problems with unexploded ordnance in Grenada. U.S. unexploded ordnance killed civilians after combat ended. And now Afghanistan is one of the major places in the world where leftover ordnance from the various wars over the past twenty five years is still killing and maiming people.

Q: While you were there in '90 to '91 did you have a feeling that the navy was kind of looking around for a role? Germany was getting united and the Soviet Union was falling apart. What do you do with a submarine in this environment?

WRIGHT: Well, there were a lot of submariners that were very interested [laughs] in other aspects of naval operations. Actually I think they felt their position was pretty secure because we'll always have to have these lonely, isolated bases of communication and firepower out to sea. I think it was more the battleship guys that were wondering what was going to happen to them. What was very interesting was to learn of the ties that had been made between our U.S. navy and the Russian navy. Admiral Crowe I believe was CNO (Chief of Naval Operations) at the time.

Q: Actually he was chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff at that point. This was during the Gulf War just before the?

WRIGHT: Just before, right. And then Colin Powell came in as the chairman right as the Gulf War started. But Crowe had a lot of contact with the Russian navy. We saw the results of that contact in the number of senior Russian naval officers that came to the war college to speak to us. Sometimes your mouth would just fall when the college administration would announce that Russian Admiral So-and-So would be coming to Newport. The frankness with which they spoke about the challenges that they had in their navy at that time was astounding. This was the time when the Soviet Union was breaking up and the Russian Federation was attempting to consolidate. The Russian militaries were downsizing and the former republics of the Soviet Union were forming their own militaries. It was really a fine year of lots of excellent, excellent speakers.

It was a difficult year because the Gulf War was winding up and many of the students had not been able to participate in the war.

Q: So it was '90 and '91.

WRIGHT: But there was still a lot going in the Gulf War. The officers at the war college were longing to be out where the action was and not in a school environment. One of the great hazards of one's career [laughs] is knowing when to go for educational opportunities and hoping that the crises you're trained to help with don't occur and leave you stuck and helpless in a school environment. [laughs]

Q: Did you feel that personnel, as you were getting ready to leave, was a little more obliging by this time to what to do with you?

WRIGHT: No, the State Department personnel system wasn't obliging at all. When it came time for me to bid on my next assignment after Newport it was difficult. Anytime you're not in Washington, bidding is difficult. Washington is the best place to lobby. The next best place, I guess, are major embassies rather than smaller embassies. But being on one of these educational tours or on tours with other agencies, it's very hard to manage your career. Despite phone calls and trips to Washington, bidding was hard. I ended up assigned to the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs. On one level this assignment made sense because I was just coming from a military school. On the other hand, the job was in arms control and I had no background or interest in arms control.

So I ultimately got to Washington but in a roundabout way. Other things were happening in the world that diverted my arrival in Washington. With the breakup of the Soviet Union fifteen new countries emerged as former republics of the old Soviet Union. The State Department was starting embassies in all of these countries beginning in January or February of '91. I was in Newport when I heard that the embassies were opening up. I was so frustrated in Newport. I wanted to help open one of those embassies. So I started calling everybody that I knew in Washington to find out who was assigning people to these embassies. Miraculously, one of the key people in assigning personnel was our former general services officer in Managua, Nicaragua. John Sherbourn and I had numerous conversations about where I could fit into the staffing patterns. Initially John was looking for Russian speakers to go out as there was no time to train anyone. The first teams were chosen generally based on language ability. So I said, "Well, John, you're going to run out of the Russian language speakers real quickly, aren't you?" and he said, "Well, we probably will." I said, "Please put my name in the pot for once you run out of the Russian speakers. I want to be involved in this." So John kept looking out for me and as I came out of the war college our new embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, needed replacement officers and they were ready to take anyone even Ann Wright who didn't speak a word of Russian.

So I, a political officer, ended up going to Uzbekistan as an administrative officer. John said, "The political officer has to speak Russian. The admin officer doesn't," I said, "I've never been an admin officer," and he said, "Well, it would do you good." [laughs] And indeed it did me good because seeing how an embassy operates from the administrative side is critical. It's a position that every Foreign Service officer ought to have to serve in. Just like you have to do a year of consular work, I firmly believe every Foreign Service officer should do at least one assignment in the administrative field. Then you know the complexities of embassy operations and the problems. Then you, as a political officer later on, won't be causing needless problems for the admin section. [laughs] I got to go Uzbekistan, one of the most interesting and intriguing places of Central Asia, and a place that has been very important for the support of U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

Q: You were there from when to when?

WRIGHT: I was in Uzbekistan from July to October of '91. I helped finalize the lease agreement for the chancery itself, helped lease the first housing that we had for embassy staff. I was involved in all the things that you have to do to set up an embassy. We trained the new FSN staff which was fascinating because you were training people that had never seen things U.S. and western equipment. We knew that the people we were interviewing for jobs were being sent to us by the Uzbek government. They were people that the Uzbeks wanted to be working in the embassy so they could report back to the government on what we were doing. Recognizing that reality and making sure that we had them trained in the way that we wanted them and have access to the information that we wanted them to have and not what others wanted them to have was challenging.

Security was a nightmare because none of the facilities for any of those embassies in the early days at least the first six months had any form of real security. We had to have our officers sleep in the embassies because we had no secure areas for classified materials. None had Marine guards. We had one little safe with very limited classified documents so you had to have somebody sleeping with the safe. Each day you watched the embassy grow. Day by day, there was a little more security, a little more finesse on the administrative issues. The political and economic officers were getting out and talking to Uzbek people. I got to go on several trips with our political officer as we wanted two officers when there was an opportunity to travel outside of Tashkent.

Q: What was Uzbekistan like in those days?

WRIGHT: It's one of the most Muslim of all of the countries from the former Soviet Union. Other countries of Central Asia are not as Muslim as Uzbekistan. For example, many of the people of Kyrgyzstan, a neighbor of Uzbekistan, are not Muslim. To be able to see the great mosques in Samarkand and the beautiful ikat materials, costumes and embroidered skullcaps of men with the skullcaps and ladies wearing the beautiful silk jackets was thrilling. Uzbekistan is a starkly beautiful country. Most of it is desert. However, even in the summer, the mornings were cool but by 10:00 AM, the heat would build up and by early afternoon, the sun was oppressive. Under the Soviets, Uzbekistan was used as the cotton producing republic. There was no concern for the environmental impact of turning the country into a cotton plantation. Huge rivers were diverted to irrigate the cotton crop. As a result the rivers that fed the Aral Sea were diverted and the Aral Sea has become an environmental nightmare.

Q: It's essentially dried up.

WRIGHT: It's dried up because of the irrigation that's come from it and the damming of the Amu Daria River, the two major rivers, to support the huge Soviet cotton industry. Still, there was a lot of agricultural production going on—fruits and melons that are famed throughout Central Asia that come from Uzbekistan. The government itself, though, was heavy-handed and has gotten more heavy-handed as political opposition developed. From the very early days of the embassy, we had difficulty with the government concerning movement of our own people around the country and of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that wanted to come in and work. Representatives of the National Democratic Institute wanted to do political development work in Uzbekistan. The government of Uzbekistan did not want to have any seminars on political development, grassroots democracy. The first NDI representative was sent packing very quickly because of the strong "threats" of security thugs.

Q: Did you find, on the part of the people, interest in the United States?

WRIGHT: Yes, Uzbeks were fascinated to meet Americans. Most Uzbeks had never met Americans. Americans had not traveled in any great numbers through Central Asia during the Soviet era as you had to have special permission. But citizens of other western countries, European countries, had traveled through the region. When we as embassy staff would travel to other cities, we were welcomed with great Uzbek hospitality—a sheep, rice pilaf and lots of cups of hot tea.

Q: You left there around October or so of '91, was it?

WRIGHT: Yes. From Uzbekistan, I went to the State Department and worked two months in the arms control office long enough to go to Geneva for one round of negotiations with the Russians on the comprehensive test ban treaty. That was a fascinating experience. I had never been involved in any negotiating process. So to see how the Department puts together its materials and then to be a part of the negotiating team was quite an experience. After the negotiating sessions at the social hour over glasses of vodka, the Russian negotiators would tell us stories about the lack of funding for their programs. They knew their arms control programs were on the ropes; there was no money left for their program. But they loved to tell of the glory days of their nuclear program. One Russian general regaled us with tales of the nuclear testing facility on the northern island of Novaya Zemla. He told of scientists going between buildings in driving snow storms and never returning. He said the scientists were taken by polar bears that lived on the island. In preparation for the round of negotiations, our delegation had seen movies of Novaya Zemla and it looked like a desolate, harsh, unforgiving, isolated place.

Q: These negotiations had been going on for years, hadn't they?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: Was it a feeling when you were going to Geneva that this was sort of something that was ongoing but really didn't make any difference?

WRIGHT: Yes, although I think we were starting to think that there was light at the end of the tunnel. We thought the Soviets were going to be reaching a position where they really had no way to maintain their nuclear programs and we were going to need to develop some sort of an approach to them. But at that point we were still officially in the traditional negotiations routine. It was time for that round of negotiations, you went and did it and you didn't expect to get a lot out of it.

Q: Well, then how long did you last in this?

WRIGHT: I lasted only 2 months in arms control. While I was in Geneva, information in the international press indicated the U.S. was considering very strongly putting in a force into Somalia. Warlords were not letting donated food through to major cities. Warlords were stealing huge convoys of food. A great number of Somali people had died of starvation. The city of Baidoa was called the "city of death" because of the tens of thousands of children that had died there. From August until November the U.S. had airlifted food from Kenya into Somalia. Word was coming out of Washington that we might go in and try to open up lines of supply to help the starving people, so when I got back into Washington I immediately went up to Mark Grossman who was at the time the principal deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Political/Military Affairs and said I wanted out of the arms control assignment and wanted to help with Somalia. The continuing television images of starving children finally mobilized the Bush administration in the last days of the administration to commit thirty thousand U.S. military to keeping the food supply lines open in Somalia. (end of tape)

Q: You were saying you were a very junior person on the arms control team.

WRIGHT: Yes, I was in a filler position. I knew immediately upon my assignment to the arms control office that the job and I were a mis-match. First, I had no interest in arms control and secondly, the office was very poorly managed. It was the only position in the State Department I was ever assigned to where no one seemed to be doing anything. Within the first week, I knew I had to get out of that office. So I went to Mark Grossman and explained my concerns. He acknowledged the problems with the office but said: "If you would please go on to Geneva for the round of negotiations with the Russians, when you get back we'll talk about where in the bureau you might be best used."

So when I returned from Geneva, I went back to Mark and said, "I really want to work on the Somalia project." The Bureau of Political/Military Affairs had an International Security Operations office which was the part of the State Department that was focused on enlisting the aid of other countries to help out with Somalia. The ISO needed more people in the office and Mark kindly put me in that office. It was one of the best assignments I have ever had. Officers were pros at getting intra and inter agency decisions in a very short time. We did lots of liaison work within the Department and with other agencies, particularly Department of Defense.

As I went into that office the first troops were going into Somalia in late December of '92. They were finding that as they would move food through the country there would be Somalis that would say, "You've got to do more than just move food. You've got to help disarm the warlords." Our office was part of the State Department team that was working to get the United Nations to take on the Somali operation as a UN operation. I got to be a part of the U.S. delegation from Washington to go up to New York to talk to the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations. At the time there was a young Guinean diplomat Kofi Annan who was the deputy of peacekeeping operations. We got to know him very, very well.

My particular role on that team was to convince the UN they should continue the help the U.S. was giving to reconstitution of the former Somali police force. U.S. troops had already found a lot of Somali police coming back onto the streets in Mogadishu saying to the soldiers, "We will help on the streets to help direct traffic, to help keep Somali traffic out of your way; we'll help keep order in the neighborhoods. If you'll just keep the warlords off our backs then we'll help with just ordinary law and order." That was exactly where our troops needed some help. So our U.S. military had sent back word that they needed funding to buy some uniforms for these police guys, to pay them somehow either give them food for work or come up with some sort of little stipend for which we were able to do. But when we wanted to turn the program over to the UN, we wanted to make sure the UN would continue this critical program. I went to the UN with the statistics on how many people we needed and what we were "paying" at the time. I got to go to Somalia to look at the police program and took with me members of the FBI's International Criminal Investigative and Training Assistance (ICITAP) program to evaluate what else the U.S. should be doing with the police. Before I left for Somalia, U.S. Navy Admiral Jonathan Howe, the former deputy national security council director under the Bush administration, a four-star admiral who had just retired from military service, had been arm-twisted into being the U.S. nominee as the first representative of the secretary general for the United Nations operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). The French had nominated a person for the job. But the United States wanted to have a U.S. civilian chief of UNOSOM since we were going to have many U.S. soldiers in Somalia. After some bickering within the Security Council, Admiral Howe was selected as the chief of the UN's Somalia operation.

Admiral Howe came out to Somalia while I was there to take a look at the operations before he arrived officially. While in Somalia I briefed him on the police program and he asked if I would be a part of UNOSOM and continue to work the police program. The police program turned into the justice program and entailed rebuilding not only the Somali police but the judicial and prison systems as well. I, along with several other Americans, was put onto Admiral Howe's staff to provide a core American presence to be working with the professional United Nations staff. That was one of the things that Admiral Howe demanded [laughs]: that the U.S. would push hard on the UN so that he could get some American Foreign Service and U.S. military officers directly on his staff. Good from his point of view, but the United Nations was a little bit bent out of shape that an American who was recently a U.S. military officer would be heading the civilian part of the operation, and then demanding that U.S. Foreign Service officers and military officers take key positions on his staff instead of professional UN staff. But that's what happened.

Q: When you went out there permanently, when was this?

WRIGHT: I was seconded to UNOSOM in February of '93.

Q: When you'd been up in the UN did they want to get into this thing or were we dragging them kicking and screaming?

WRIGHT: The UN professional staff was very wary of the U.S. dragging the UN into Somalia. The U.S. dragged the UN into Somalia with the UN kicking and screaming. I guess that was the first time we dragged them in and I predict we continue to drag them kicking and screaming in Iraq.

In the beginning, the UN staff said it was the U.S. unilateral decision to go in and help on the humanitarian side and that the U.S. constructed a coalition of fifteen countries to do this operation and you got yourself into all of this and you should continue and not the United Nations. Then the U.S. pushed hard and ultimately the Security Council authorized that the United Nations would go ahead and take over the operation. But it was a very difficult one for the UN to take over because at that point the Department of Peacekeeping Operations was truly peacekeeping; it was not peacemaking. This was the first Article 7, or peacemaking operation, that had been authorized by the Security Council. The forces that went in under UN auspices would go in with the authorization to use force to maintain control. They wouldn't be peace observers and just be able to shoot if shot upon, but they could go out and disarm people.

At that point the Department of Peacekeeping Operations was very, very small. In fact they had no operations center; they had no military staff, they had a very, very tiny, little office in New York. After the Somalia experience, the UN created a true 24 hour operations center. Our U.S. military went up to New York, along with military representatives from other countries, to help them set up a twenty-four hour operations center. At the time the UN had no ability to go out and search for countries to fill such a huge role. The U.S. and its coalition members had over 30,000 military that went into Somalia. The UN had never mounted any military operation with any number close to that before. So we, the U.S. (particularly the Office of International Security Operations), asked many countries to contribute troops to this coalition, a process that has been used endless times in the last ten years. ISO was the key office in the Department that wrote and got cleared from other State Department offices and endless DOD offices the cables that went out of the Department asking our embassies to go to the governments and request that they join the UN's coalition of military forces in Somalia.

Q: When you went out to Somalia what was the situation like on the ground when you first got there?

WRIGHT: When I first got there the security environment was pretty good. The warlords had accepted the fact that there was a huge U.S. and coalition presence. They were not challenging in any way the U.S. military. They were allowing the military to escort the food convoys that were going out all over the country to feed the starving. We from the Bureau of Political/Military Affairs were urging the Department of Defense to disarm the warlords right then. We figured that was the time to disarm the bad guys when we had so many U.S. military in Somalia and the warlords had backed off. But the decision was made by our government that that U.S. forces would not disarm the warlords. We would leave it to the UN to later disarm them.

As we found out, leaving disarming the warlords to the poorly equipped UN forces didn't work at all. The moral of that lesson, to me, is that if you're going to go into situations with warlords, you need to be ready to go ahead and immediately disarm the warlords who are causing the conflict. You can not dilly-dally around because it won't get done if it's not done in the very early days when you have the warlords stunned by your overwhelming presence.

Q: What was the spirit when you got out there on the police front? Did you feel that this was going to work?

WRIGHT: Yes. The Somali police were working in the areas in which we needed help. We needed them for the traffic control and for assistance in domestic criminal cases. If there were problems in neighborhoods, we let them solve the situations and keep us informed. That was working. We were getting police coming out from the rubble and volunteering to help us in every town that we went into. The police had had excellent training before, they were professional. Now they had very little equipment, but they still remembered their basic policing skills.

Q: As I recall, the police were probably the most professional, they were sort of a major power in the area.

WRIGHT: That's right. The Somali police had received a lot of international training from the British, French and Italians. Each of those nations had "colonized" a part of greater Somalia, or Somaliland, in some time of its history.

Q: Italian, French and British.

WRIGHT: Each of those countries had done a very good job in training police. We had a core group of police in every region that volunteered to help first the U.S. forces and then the UN. At one stage we had over 10,000 police assisting UNOSOM.

Q: At a certain point this became one of those lessons of what not to do, and that was known as Mission Creep where we went from assuring lines of supplies and all to the starving people and all, to starting to call it nation building and all. Were you there when that began?

WRIGHT: Yes, the police program was the first element of that creep and it crept on us because we needed it. We needed Somali police to relieve our own military of some of the duties that they felt were not theirs, like normal traffic policing. As that program started then the idea of if you've got police on the streets and they're picking up people and could be charged with crimes of burglary or murder or whatever not the warlords' murder, but the average citizens murder then you've got to have a court system to try them. Then if you've got the court system that tried them, you've got to reestablish prisons to put the convicted in. All of a sudden we moved very quickly into reestablishing many types of civil administration institutions. At the same time you had Somalis that were saying, "We haven't been able to have our schools in operation for a while. We need to get our schools going again," and "We've got health clinics that should be patched up so we can use them. Help us, please, with these." As you would start trying to help these sectors then essentially what you've done is created the need for the international community to help monitor or coordinate or organize these systems with the local Somalis. It goes very quickly from just securing lines of supply to assisting in lots of other areas that have to really be helped. It seems to me that there will never be a military operation that will be neat and clean and without the need for some element of civil reconstruction, unless it's a strike operation on a nuclear plant and you do it by air. Once you put military troops on the ground, you have created a situation that you're going to have to do some level of nation rebuilding.

Q: Did you see the turn towards getting rid of the warlords? In the first place, the arrival of a lot of UN troops, particularly Pakistanis and others, were these a plus or a minus, in a way?

WRIGHT: The arrival of the Pakistanis as a major element of the UN military forces was a plus because without them there would not have been a UN presence. The U.S. was fully intent on moving out the vast majority of its troops by late March, early April of '93. The U.S. was moving its troops faster than UN troops were coming into Somalia. The U.S. was orchestrating who was volunteering to be a part of that UN force. The U.S. told the Pakistanis that we would fly their troops and equipment into Somalia. We were telling the Nigerians: "We will give you anything you want. Do you need weapons? Do you need uniforms? What do you need?" because we wanted to pull our troops out of Somalia and we needed replacement units.

The U.S. pulled back faster than we supplied the other nations with transportation to get into Somalia. I remember vividly in Mogadishu sitting at one of the UNOSOM senior staff meetings with Admiral Howe and being briefed by the very small UN military contingent. The UN military commander said, "Admiral, you may not realize it but right now the U.S. only has 10,000 troops left in Somalia and we only have 5,000 UN troops here. So there are only 15,000 troops on the ground. Before there were 30,000 troops. 5,000 of the Americans are going to be leaving next week, which means we will only have 10,000 military on the ground and we have no more UN troops on the horizon to come to Somalia. The next UN units will arrive in a month or two later. We are in serious trouble. We don't have enough military here for the security we need."

It wasn't just the UN that was realizing there were too few military to keep adequate security. The warlords had their people at the seaport and airport. They were watching and counting who was coming and going and they saw, particularly General Aided, very quickly that the numbers of U.S. troops on the ground were fewer and fewer while there were only a small number of UN replacements coming in. That gave Aideed confidence that he could attack the UN forces. He picked the Pakistanis to ambush because they had been ordered to seize a radio station that Aided had been using to put out all sorts of nasty little propaganda against U.S. and UN forces. The Pakistanis were instructed to go in and take over the radio station so it wouldn't be broadcasting anymore not to destroy it, but just to stop Aideed's guys from using it. The Pakistanis took control over the station and then started moving the majority of their troops back down through central Mogadishu back to the stadium where they were living. Aideed militia attacked them and killed forty-seven of them. Killed and mutilated mean really did despicable things to that group of Pakistanis. With that attack it was war between the UN and General Aideed. At the instigation of the U.S., the UN allowed a \$25,000 reward to be put out for Aideed "dead or alive," a program that made the UN troops on the ground feel better, but ended up causing ever increasing bitterness in the Somali community. Neither UN nor unilateral U.S. missions to kill or capture Aideed were successful. By the middle of 1994, eighteen months after the U.S. intervention, the Aideed had beaten back the U.S. unilateral Delta Force and Ranger operation chronicled in the "Black Hawk Down" movie and had beaten back the commitment of the international community.

Q: How long were you there?

WRIGHT: I stayed from February until August.

Q: So what was the situation in August when you left? Had the warlords started their attacks by this time?

WRIGHT: Yes. The Pakistanis were killed in June and from June on it was very, very difficult to move around Mogadishu. It was difficult to drive overland anywhere, especially in central and southern Somalia. In the northwest, the old former British Somaliland, General Egal had declared independence from the rest of Somalia and set up his own administration. He was trying desperately trying to get the international community to recognize his government. He was running a very good operation; things were happening up there. Commerce was starting up again with minimal human rights violations. To a lesser degree, in the Bossaso area in the northeast was also beginning to thrive. But central and southern Somalia was definitely in the grips of bad warlords.

Q: Did you sense within your group a growing frustration? You know, we've got to lash out; we've got to do something.

WRIGHT: Yes. It started right after the Pakistanis were killed. Of course, that incident stunned everyone. It was incredible that General Aided would have the nerve to mount an attack against the United Nations forces and so quickly after its arrival. Very quickly, with U.S. pressure, there was a specific program where wanted posters saying "\$25,000 for General Aideed " were quickly printed up by psychological operations teams that the U.S. still had there. Those posters incited a lot of violence in Mogadishu. There was a lot of support for General Aideed and General Atta in Mogadishu because the warlords were feeding a great number of people there. The posters that said whoever gives us information that will help us capture Aideed caused great problems. Four Somalis who were distributing the UN newspaper that contained the posters were murdered as they went out into neighborhoods to distribute the newspapers that had some of these requests for information.

The United Nations military forces asked the U.S. to use its helicopters in Mogadishu to attack certain compounds where we thought Aided might be. These attacks were very problematic in terms of international law. The UN forces would cordon off a section of Mogadishu and then the helicopters would fire into the building where they believed Aideed was regardless of the number of "civilians" in the building. As the head of the UN's Justice division, I felt it was my obligation to highlight to the head of the UN operations that in my legal judgment those operations were in violation of the law of land warfare. I am a lawyer and I have international law and the law of land warfare experience in the U.S. military. I taught international law at Fort Bragg to the officers that spearhead U.S. military operations. I believed the way the UN military forces were mounting its operations was in violation of international law because it was not giving notice to civilians of direct attacks that were going to occur on specific buildings, and were in fact cordoning off the area so the civilians couldn't escape. I put my two cents worth into a memo to Admiral Howe. This memo was very quickly leaked to the international press by members of the UN civilian staff who were very displeased with the way UN military operations were being conducted as they jeopardized critical humanitarian operations. My memo caused quite a bit of notoriety about the dissension within UNOSOM. However, my memo didn't stop the way the UN military was conducting operations. Later on in September, '93, the U.S. started its own unilateral operations in Somalia to keep going after Aideed.

Q: This was after you left.

WRIGHT: Yes, about three weeks after I left, the U.S. brought in special teams Delta Forces and Rangers and formed a military command outside the United Nations. The deputy UN military commander was a two-star U.S. Army general and the head of all the UN military was a three-star Turkish general. The U.S. wanted to have the number two position because we wanted a U.S. general in the change of command for U.S. logistics and communication unit that were assigned to the UN operation. We wanted to have our general so we could maintain to that U.S. troops were always under U.S. command, an important fig leaf. The U.S. two-star deputy UN military commander was not informed by the U.S. military that they were going to be bringing in special operations troops, Delta troops and Rangers, to mount unilateral U.S. operations against Aided. In September, the U.S. unilateral mission resulted in two helicopters getting shot down and pilots killed and dragged through the streets and another taken hostage. The force that went in to rescue the downed helicopter pilots then came under fire with seventeen Rangers killed in the rescue mission.

Q: But hundreds of Somalis.

WRIGHT: No one knows the numbers of Somalis killed. By that time I had left Somalia and had come back to Washington to start Russian language training for my onward assignment to Kyrgyzstan. For my one Washington assignment I escaped with serving only two months in Washington by volunteering to go to Somalia. I had enjoyed being in Central Asia and bid on our embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. I came back to start Russian language training. In September, I was sitting in language class when the head of the Russian language training came into our small classroom and said, "Which one of you all is Ann Wright?" and I thought, Uh, oh. This is not really a question that I want to answer. But I said "I am." And the chief said, "Have you been watching the news?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, there are big problems in Somalia and we've just gotten a phone call from Dick Clarke over at the National Security Council. He wants you to come over there right now." And I thought, Oh, god. Here we go. It turned out to be the downing of two U.S. helicopters in Mogadishu - the Blackhawk Down incident.

When I had come back from Somalia I had gone by the National Security Council to talk to Dick Clarke and a junior staff member at the time, a woman by the name of Susan Rice who several years later became the assistant secretary of state for African Affairs. Dick Clarke had been heading the Somali operations for the NSC. When we would have big inter-agency meetings or video conferencing Dick would usually chair them. From the beginning of the U.S. operation in Somalia and subsequently in the UN operation, the police program was an integral part of our operations. I had had a lot of face time with Dick, talking to him either in person or over the video conferencing about the program. When I came back from Somalia I went by the NSC to remind him that the U.S. had not kicked in its contribution to the police program. United Nations was doing what we wanted to be done with the police, judicial and prison programs. But the monies that the U.S. promised to the UN for these programs had not shown up. The programs were suffering because the UN didn't have the contributions from donor nations like the UN. So upon my return from Somalia, I dutifully went back to the NSC to tell Dick and Susan that I felt the U.S. had let the UN down on these critical programs. At the time I said, "These are going to be key programs that will ensure the stability, to the extent anything can ensure it, for Somalia and we've got to really help the UN do this." I laid it on thick.

So, after the Blackhawk Down incident, the NSC wanted to talk about the U.S. exit strategy from Somalia. Clarke said the White House had decided that fully funding the police and judicial programs would be a key part of the U.S. exit strategy. The U.S. would fund these programs, get our troops out of Somalia, and turn the whole damn thing over to the UN because we had lost troops. We would wash our hands of Somalia. Blackhawk Down was a military and political embarrassment to the United States. Two helicopters shot down by Aideed's militia. The warlords were beating our most experienced and talented special operations troops. So the U.S. would back out of this mess and the way we would get out would be to very publicly say that the U.S. is proud to really start pushing the police program as the key to the success of Somalia. So Clarke said, "I want you to go back to Somalia very, very quickly and get a good police program moving," and I said, "Well, I need money to move it." He said, "Twelve million dollars. You got it right now. Go find people to help you."

I had worked with the FBI's (Federal Bureau of Investigation) international criminal assistance training program (ICITAP) earlier in the year. We had brought out some of the ICITAP people to do an early assessment of what things needed to be done with the police. We created budgets for the items the program would need and submitted the budgets through the UN back to the U.S. But the U.S. had never provided funds. So Dick said, "Twelve million, ICITAP, I don't care - whoever you can talk into helping. Let's just get moving with this." So I made a quick trip over to ICITAP headquarters to let them know of our opportunity. Within about a week we had a ten person group that went back into Somalia and started working with the UN to get the police program moving and we did move fast. We created a police training academy, we had a judicial program, and cleaned up the prisons a little bit. All of this was in place by March of the next year. I only stayed in Somalia from October until December. By that time we had enough expertise in the country that I could turn my role over to others. Unfortunately trouble continued between the warlords and UN forces. In April the international community through the Security Council decided to end its involvement in Somalia. So just as we were getting all those programs going, the international door slammed shut on Somalia.

Q: It turned into real chaos. Apparently it's beginning to get a little better now. I think they've gotten exhausted or something like that.

WRIGHT: [laughs] That's probably the only way it's better.

Q: Well, I think this is a good place to stop. So we're talking about '94?

WRIGHT: Yes, early '94.

Q: So we'll pick up what happens to you after you get out of the Somali thing. So where did you go?

WRIGHT: From Somalia I went back and completed a couple months of Russian language training and then went to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia in the summer of 1994.

Q: Alright, well we'll pick it up when you're off to Bishkek.

Ann, you're off to Bishkek and you were there for how long?

WRIGHT: I was there for two years.

Q: What was your job?

WRIGHT: I was the administrative officer at the embassy. I wanted to go back to Central Asia and to Bishkek in particular. But the embassy's only open position was as the admin officer. As a political officer you always question whether you should serve out of cone but I had such an interesting experience as an admin officer in Tashkent for a couple of months that I thought that would be quite fascinating to continue work in the admin field.

Q: Could you describe the magnificent embassy we had in Bishkek at the time?

WRIGHT: It was stellar. We tried to renovate the small, old building and found out it was a log cabin!

Q: Really?

WRIGHT: Yes, a little log cabin. It was a historical site of Bishkek and the government kindly identified it for our roving real estate guy whl can't remember his name, but some real estate guru that the State Department hired to quickly go around and pinpoint sites for our fifteen new embassies. Some of the sites that were made available to our new missions were quite strange. Bishkek had one of the strangest buildings.

Q: I speak from experience because around '94 or '95 I was there for three weeks and saw that place.

WRIGHT: When I got there, there was no fence around any part of the property. The front door was a very flimsy little wooden door. You could punch your hand through any wall in the place. It was definitely not a secure embassy.

Q: Well, you didn't have to worry because I think one block away was the state security service run by the Soviets, wasn't it?

WRIGHT: That's right. In fact there was a telephone line that ran across the roof of the intervening building between the intelligence building and ours. It ran across the roof and it was hooked into our roof. [laughs] But we cut that line and kept cutting it and kept cutting it. Finally, we had security people that did an underground survey of the building. All of these things happened two years after the establishment of the embassy! For two years we really didn't apparently know what was under our embassy. Fortunately it was nothing more than just dirt and foundation as best we could find, but it certainly was a vulnerable place.

Q: How did you find working in that environment? You know, getting administrative things done.

WRIGHT: Administrative issues were always a challenge because of the lack of resources in the Kyrgyz market. The Bishkek market still had mostly Soviet supplies in it and they were dwindling. Our lifeline at the end of two years was Germany and Western Europe, but it hadn't been developed when I first got there. By the time I left two years later it was developing and you could find a lot more things there like sinks for bathrooms and kitchen appliances for the apartments. But in the early days there was very little there. We also used the monthly support flights that were being flown into all of the small, small embassies. Those flights could bring in supplies and food purchased at the commissary in Frankfurt. We could put in individual food orders and have them flown in for us.

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

WRIGHT: Ed Horowitz was there for about two months finishing up his two-year tour when I got there. He was followed by Eileen Malloy.

Q: How did that work out?

WRIGHT: Very well. Ambassador Horowitz was a very interesting character himself and developed his own style of operating within the Kyrgyz environment. Ambassador Malloy brought a completely different aspect to embassy life as she and her husband arrived with a little five- year-old girl. Suddenly the embassy changed from supporting a bachelor ambassador to an ambassador with concerns about balancing the job with family life. Both of the ambassadors worked quite well in the Kyrgyz political scene.

Q: How did you find morale? I remember when I was there the consular officer was a very capable woman, Julie Rodenberry. She was saying, with others, that there was no real social life. If you went out with any Kyrgyz or something like that, the whole idea was to go to a so-called restaurant there were about four there and get a bottle of vodka and consume it at the table. You know, that was the sport of the day.

WRIGHT: [laughs] Well, certainly the types of entertainment were very limited usually consisted of going out to dinner. On weekends there might be a concert, opera or a symphony performance. The Soviets left a legacy in all of the former Soviet republics of "western" music and arts. All of the capital cities had a symphony hall and an opera. The ones in Bishkek were pretty good. What provided the most entertainment for us, I think, was leaving Bishkek and going out into the beautiful countryside. If you were a sports person or an outdoors person it was a wonderful, wonderful place for hiking, horseback riding and trekking. The other source of entertainment was taking the four-hour trip over to Almaty, Kazakhstan, which was developing at a much more rapid pace than Bishkek. Almaty already had lots of western stores. We would go over for grocery shopping trips. The embassy crew in Almaty was very, very gracious folks who always welcomed us and helped us out a lot. Their embassy was three or four times as large as ours. They got a lot more things and a lot more attention from Washington. Whenever we had any problems in Bishkek, they would pull out the stops to help us with whatever we needed.

Q: How did you find all the missionaries, non-governmental agencies? I mean the place was awash with all sorts of Americans and other Europeans and all out to do good, or to do good for themselves or something.

WRIGHT: It definitely was a growth industry there. The Kyrgyz were more accepting than the Uzbeks had been. When I had been in Uzbekistan two years earlier the NGO community was having a very rough time in Uzbekistan. But in Kyrgyzstan most of the NGOs found their niches. But there were plenty of them that were trying to develop programs there. And I guess its part of the syndrome that whenever there's a new opportunity opening up in the world, a new country that's opened up, people flock in. [laughs]

WRIGHT: Yes, indeed. Afghanistan is the same way. We had barely gotten into Kabul before we started running into people representing the wheelchairs for the handicapped, and many other humanitarian organizations. They were all there for good humanitarian reasons but you wondered how they could operate in that environment. I guess being there helps for sending out a new appeal to their membership.

Q: So brush over this period rather briefly, after two years how did you find your two years there?

WRIGHT: It was fascinating. It was great because we had lots of challenges in reconstructing first our little bitty log cabin embassy building making it more usable. With the assistance of the embassy in Almaty who had embarked on a huge building program, we got all of their leftovers and were able to construct a two-story building next to that little log cabin and make real progress on adequate space for our employees. (end of tape)

Just one more thing on Kyrgyzstan before we go on to Sierra Leone. One of the real fascinating aspects was the Kyrgyz culture and all of the unique handicrafts like the yurts, the felt tents that they have that?Kyrgyzstan, being formerly a nomadic society, had very fascinating and interesting accouterments. The embassy became known as a good place for people to come and sell cultural handicrafts. One day we got a visit from a family who had just been awarded a grand prize for the most beautiful yurt that had been made in Kyrgyzstan for years. They were supposed to have received not only a prize, but a stipend from the government. The government was to take this yurt and display it at the national museum. A government official reportedly instead bought a Mercedes with the money they were supposed to get this family. The family wanted to sell the yurt to regain some of the money that they had sunk into this yurt.

So I embarked on a great adventure with the museums of America to see if some museum would want to buy this beautiful yurt; it was a marvelous, marvelous art thing. No one would; nobody was interested in it. I had a friend that happened to be coming out to visit. She was on the board of one of the museums in San Diego. She purchased the yurt and took it back to San Diego and had it displayed at the San Diego Museum of Man and Culture for a long time. This next week I am going to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for a special Mountain People's Folk Festival. The Kyrgyz yurt will be on display again. The Kyrgyz ambassador to the U.S. the same ambassador that's been here for six years in Washington is again going out to Jackson Hole. The cultural side of Kyrgyzstan was one of the most interesting parts of it for me.

Q: Well, now, how did the Sierra Leone thing come about?

WRIGHT: I went to Sierra Leone through a connection from Somalia. One of the people that I worked with in Somalia was John Hirsch, who had been brought there by Ambassador Bob Oakley for a two-month tour of duty in late 1992. A few years later John subsequently was named as the ambassador to Sierra Leone. When his first deputy chief of mission was ready to move on to his next assignment, Ambassador Hirsch got in touch with me to see if I would become the DCM. At the time I was still an FS-03 and to be able to move up into an -01 position was quite good so even though West Africa was not one of the places that I really had any interest in, it sounded like a good career move.

Q: So you went to Sierra Leone when?

WRIGHT: In 1996.

Q: How long were you there?

WRIGHT: For two years. My assignment was for two years. I was actually in-country only about fourteen months because we had to be evacuated because of terrible atrocities committed by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

Q: When you went there in '96 what was the situation? Could you talk a little bit about Sierra Leone at that time?

WRIGHT: Sierra Leone had for decades been ruled by Shieka Stevens I think they called him a kleptocraone of the dictators of West Africa that had stole the country blind. Anyway, Stevens had been deposed in a coup by junior army officers in the early '90s. These junior officers ruled the country for about four yearand I mean really junior; they were in their mid-twenties. The head of state of Sierra Leone was a twenty-five-year-old named Valentine Strasser. During this time though, rebel activities started first against the dictator and then against the military junta. The international community put pressure on the military junta, these junior fellows, to turn over power, to permit an election, so that there would no longer be a military junta.

These guys were tempted with offers of scholarships in Europe and the United States. At some point they succumbed to the pressure of the international community and allowed elections to take place. The security environment in Sierra Leone meant the elections only happened in about forty-five percent of the territory in Sierra Leone. The rest of the territory was under siege by the Revolutionary United Front which was a group of Sierra Leonean and Liberians funded by Charles Taylor of Liberia, Muammar Qadhafi of Libya, and Blaise Campare oGuinea Bissau. Despite the election not being able to be held throughout the country, the election took place.

Q: What year was this?

WRIGHT: That was in early 1996 before I arrived there. The person that won the election was Tejan Kabbah, who was a retired United Nations official. He had served thirty years with the UN and his last job was as the head of the political division of all the United Nations. He was a very senior UN diplomat, very well respected, who had come back to Sierra Leone hoping to just to retire to his home country. He said he never intended to go into Sierra Leonean politics but got Shanghaied into it. After his election in 1996, there was a quiet period of about four or five months when international figures attempted to broker a peace with the rebel group.

Q: Had you arrived by this time?

WRIGHT: Just as I arrived the Revolutionary United Front really started strong, strong operations against the government forces. At this time there were some very interesting things going on. In 1994 the military junta hired South African mercenaries to assist their poorly trained and poorly equipped military with logistical and armed helicopter support. This mercenary group was called "Executive Outcomes", quite a name for mercenaries. Executive Outcomes had worked in several other countries and had a colorful background.

Q: These are basically white mercenaries, right?

WRIGHT: Yes, they were white mercenaries that were highly trained and very experienced. They brought in helicopters and started making some progress against the rebel forces, pushing them back into the outer areas of Sierra Leone. As that was happening, and the international community was developing aid programs for Sierra Leone. There was an elected government now and areas in the country that were secure enough that help could be brought for education and health and infrastructure development. That help also consisted of payments to the national treasury through the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to help the national budget. But as the role of Executive Outcomes became larger and larger and the amount of money that the national government was paying to the mercenary group grew larger, over a period of months the IMF started questioning whether the IMF's money was being used to pay for mercenaries. Of course using IMF money to pay mercenaries is prohibited.

It turned out that some of the IMF money was being used to pay the Executive Outcome contract because there was not enough revenue generated by the government of Sierra Leone. Pressure was put on the Kabbah government to insure that IMF funds were not being used for payments to Executive Outcomes, or payments to the Sierra Leone military itself. Kabbah said, "I don't have enough nation-generated revenues and if you force me stop using IMF funds, then I'm going to have to make cutbacks in the military." We all knew that the military's numbers were quite inflated. The military claimed they had 30,000 soldiers on active duty. Their payroll reflected they were paying 30,000 and were providing food to 30,000 families. We knew that the military's numbers weren't right, that there were some scams going on within the military, and that the military itself was taking money for soldiers that didn't exist. Sierra Leone had a ghost army.

We put pressure on the Kabbah government to reduce the size of the military and to come up with the right numbers in terms of pay and to not support a ghost army. Kabbah came back to us, "That's easy for you to say, but I'm the new guy in Sierra Leone. I've been away for thirty years, returned and then was elected as president of this country. I've got a military that is used to getting paid for 30,000 people. It's going to be really, really tough for me to reduce the size of the military in my first months in office, but I'll try." The military of course didn't like the reduction in their money making scheme. It was a real dilemma for Kabbah on how hard he could push the military to acknowledge that indeed there weren't as many soldiers on the rolls as they claimed. Predictably there was dissension within the military and rumors of possible coup attempts against Kabbah. One coup attempt was made in August, 1996. Army Major Johnny Paul Koroma actually charged and convicted of leading this coup attempt. He and his group were put in the Pademba Road prison in downtown Freetown, about one-half mile from the Government House. In '96 the government also reduced the amount that it was paying Executive Outcomes, meaning EO could do a fewer number of military operations against the RUF. They were just getting paid less and so they did less. In May '97 all of this resulted in the RUF making great advances onto Freetown and controlling greater and greater parts of the country. The RUF were committing extremely brutal atrocities to the folks out in the countryside all sorts of terrible brutalities like people being burned alive inside buildings and thatched huts and a certain amount of chopping off of arms and legs.

Q: Yes, it came very much to everybody's notice.

WRIGHT: Yes, the atrocities were known to the international community. But the most terrible atrocities occurred in 1998 but they started in 1997.

Q: What was the purpose of this?

WRIGHT: It was to intimidate the local population to not support the Kabbah government. It was pure, brutal terror raked on a population. It was also a recruiting mechanism forced recruitment of children into the RUF. The RUF would force young kids to kill their parents, then take the kids with them and over a period of a year and a half or two years, indoctrinate them into the ways of the RUF. Later on, as we were able to bring some of the children out of the RUF clutches and place them into NGO-run child-soldier camps. Kids 6, 7 and 8 years old carried weapons and killed. Some of the stories that these young kids told were just horrendous, as stories of child soldiers from other parts of the world are too.

Q: While this was going on, your ambassador and you, what were you doing? What were our concerns?

WRIGHT: We had very good relationships with Tejan Kabbah and most of his cabinet. Kabbah had "strong-armed" a few other senior UN officials from Sierra Leone to come back to Sierra Leone and help out the country, including James Jonah, a well-respected 30 year UN diplomat. We worked very closely with them. That said, in many ways, to be quite honest, the suggestions that we had for them had two aspects. First, the international community could not have its money used to support the military. Second, if country has no other way to pay for its military or to hire mercenaries to keep the evil guys out of town, you're really undercutting the government's ability to defend itself by not letting your money be used.

Q: Could you translate that? Were you telling Washington that okay, we have a policy but the policy doesn't work in this setting?

WRIGHT: Yes, indeed we were. We were graphically laying out the options that were available. The option the international community was forcing on the Kabbah government was putting the country's security at greater risk. But as so often happens, the pleas from the field are not necessarily heard or analyzed or given weight in Washington. Admittedly, sometimes there are bigger things that are happening in the world and the attention of the bureau may be in a different area. I think that's what initially was happening for Sierra Leone, that we really weren't getting the type of attention that we needed in order to get the bureaucracy to respond.

Q: Well, it's one of the smallest African countries, isn't it?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: It's essentially two riverbanks, isn't it?

WRIGHT: No, it's larger than that. It's not like the Gambia or someplace like that. It's a bigger area, but only four million people in that larger area.

Q: How about the AF bureau? I guess Susan Rice was the assistant secretary at that time, or was it somebody else?

WRIGHT: She had not come in yet. The assistant secretary for African affairs was George Moose. He stayed in that job until late '97.

Q: Was the attention essentially more or less on South Africa still? What was happening that seemed to steal stuff away from you?

WRIGHT: Well, about anything could've stolen attention away from us. Sierra Leone was just not on anybody's radar screen. Peace negotiations were going on in Liberia next door. Those negotiations had higher visibility than the fledgling democratic government in Sierra Leone even though they were right next door. A great deal of effort from the U.S. government was expended in those negotiations.

Q: What did Sierra Leone have? Diamonds and?

WRIGHT: Yes. The whole issue of conflict diamonds arose during this period. We at the embassy were maintaining that the purpose of the rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front, was to gain control of the diamond fields and to be able to move diamonds out of Sierra Leone through Liberia or through Guinea Bissau. If they had control of the government, they would have less to contend with, but they didn't need control of the government to get the diamond fields. The three nations in the region were getting big, big returns from supporting the RUF in their share of the diamonds from the RUF controlled area of Sierra Leone. Diamonds fueled the agenda of the RUF, not concern for the people of Sierra Leone.

Q: Were we getting information out of the enemy area?

WRIGHT: Not good information, no. One of the real problems that we had was the lack of intelligence assets to help us figure out what was going on with the RUF. We were continually told by the agency that that collecting intelligence on the RUF was not one of their missions. So we were in the dark about what was really going on out in the countryside until we would hear after the fact of big villages being overrun. But there was nothing that we could provide to the government would be helpful to fight the RUF. Neither was the agency looking for the sources of the RUF's support on the international scene. That just wasn't one of their concerns.

Q: What were sort of our security concerns there? Were the forces hovering too close to be comfortable?

WRIGHT: Initially they were not; they were pretty far out of Freetown, the capital. However, they were close enough that we could travel only on the peninsula that Freetown was on, which had about a forty-mile radius. The rest of the country was off-limits for us.

Q: So how did things play out when you were there from that?

WRIGHT: Remarkably, despite its reduced payments, Executive Outcomes was able to put substantial pressure on the RUF. The RUF leadership, headed by a weird character named of Foday Sankoh, a former photographer who received rebel training in Libya, decided that he would negotiate with the government. For a period of three or four months negotiations were held in Cote d'Ivoire. The negotiations failed and all of a sudden things really started going downhill fast. The rebel forces were moving closer into Freetown. We were wondering how in the world this could be happening when these peace negotiations were going on and Sierra Leone military forces had the rebels on the run. Yet the rebels kept coming closer and closer to Freetown. We suspected there must be some collusion between the Sierra Leone military and the rebels because there was no way that the rebel forces could be moving as fast as they were unless the military was letting them do so.

On the twenty-seventh or -fifth or -first of May of 1997 on a Sunday morning all hell broke loose in Freetown. There was gunfire, mortars, all sorts of gunfire. The RUF had gotten forces into Freetown and had opened the doors of the Pademba Road prison and released Johnny Paul Koroma, one of the former coup leaders, and his group. There was much gunfire in downtown Freetown.

Over the next four or five days we met with Johnny Paul Koroma who became the spokesperson for the RUF. As it turned out, he became the spokesperson for the Sierra Leone military because the military was in collusion with the RUF. Some of the most senior military officers had been in collusion with the RUF for a long time.

We tried to talk Koroma out of staying in power. At the time I was the charge d'affaires of the U.S. Embassy. Our ambassador, John Hirsch, had left the country three days before on an R&R (Rest & Recuperation Leave). We were able to set up a meeting with Koroma and with some of the military who were throwing away their military uniforms and putting on RUF clothes. The British High Commissioner and the U.N. special envoy and I met with the group of fifteen RUF and military to try to talk them out of maintaining power. We emphasized that the international community would never recognize their power grab and that they were just going to be in big trouble for doing this. That approach did not work although at one stage we thought we had a couple of the leaders convinced. We were using some of the arguments that had been made to the military junta several years earlier, that there were places that these guys could go to get a better education, to get ahead in life but not in Sierra Leone. But the temptation of control of the diamond fields won out.

The RUF was very brutal in its taking of Freetown. Lots of people were killed, assaulted and beaten up. Because of their collusion with the RUF, the military made no effort to control the violence. The RUF thugs were doing whatever they wanted. There was a contingent of Nigerian soldiers in Freetown who tried desperately to keep a stronghold on one part of the peninsula. They were running out of ammunition very quickly and said they weren't going to be able to hold out against the RUF. With this information the decision was made in Washington that we would drawdown our U.S. personnel at the embassy. Initially we were only going to send out non-emergency personnel. Ultimately though, we ended up closing the whole embassy and all U.S. personnel left. The level of violence and the number of international community people that had been attacked and the number of rapes of international women were all great sources of concern. The decisions were being made in terms of getting people out. Our embassy recommendation to Washington was to get the families out. We hoped that Washington would charter an aircraft to come in very quickly. The British did bring in a plane and I think the French may have brought in a plane. But the decision of Washington was that we would not have a plane but that we would have a U.S. naval ship that was bobbing around off the coast of the Congo waiting for the Congo to blow up, and to come up to Freetown to evacuate us. We ended up waiting three days for that ship to get up to Sierra Leone. In the meantime though, I went ahead and got some spaces on the British aircraft so that we could get our family members out. The level of gunfire and the violence that was going on was something that we couldn't protect against. Had the rebels decided to come over our walls into our compounds, we would not have been able to get out.

Q: Did you have Marines?

WRIGHT: We had a 5 person Marines Security Guard detachment. Two of the Marines were stuck in the embassy for 3 days. One had actually been kidnaped by the RUF. On the morning the coup started, one of the Marines was coming down from the Marine House to the embassy to relieve the Marine in the embassy. As he passed the Pademba Road prison, the RUF freed all the prisoners. They stopped our embassy car, forced the Marine out of the car and made him walk along the side of car as protection for those that were inside. He was out of communication with us for about three hours, which was really the most frightening incident. We knew he left the Marine House but he didn't arrive at the embassy. So where was he? He and the embassy driver eventually were released and they came to the embassy. The RUF made our driver drive our car on various trips around Freetown to deliver RUF and military and pick up others.

Q: How were communications? This was in '97, I guess, wasn't it?

WRIGHT: Yes.

Q: Had e-mail developed to such an extent? Were you able to keep in pretty good touch with Washington?

WRIGHT: Personal e-mail was just beginning. A few of our embassy officers had computers at home. Thank goodness because we use them a lot. But remarkably the coup makers did not destroy the international telephone and communications system. In fact, we think they forgot to disable it. Usually if you're going to have a coup you seize the communications facilities and knock them off so that you control everything but the RUF didn't. We were able to keep a direct line through the international phone service with Washington virtually the whole time. We also set up a satellite radio (INMARSAT) at the ambassador's residence. His residence was in a different compound than the one I lived in. Our communications officer lived adjacent to the Ambassador's compound. He got the radio from the ambassador's house to have backup communications. I was in a completely different compound. It was too dangerous to move back and forth to that compound. I and our security officer wanted everybody to stay where they were. We couldn't consolidate everyone because we didn't have enough space in either one of the places to house everyone. We had people in four locations. Two Marines were at the chancery. Half of our embassy staff in one residential compound and the other half at a second compound. We also had two AID (Agency for International Development) contractors that were living down in a hotel that was down on the peninsula. On the first day we also had a team of U.S. Special Forces training Sierra Leonean military at a training base outside of Freetown.

Washington's decision was that we would wait for the U.S.S. Kersarge to come up from the Congo to pull us out of there. But, because of the deteriorating security environment, I sent all of the families out on a British charter flight, leaving the officers for the ship. I knew there would be many American citizens and citizens from other nations who would want to be evacuated. I needed our officers to help with the evacuation.

Initially, we were going to just have essential personnel five Foreign Service officers plus Marines were going to stay in Sierra Leone. About midnight before we were going to begin the evacuation of non-emergency personnel at 6 am the next morning, Washington said that they had been getting indications that there might be some kidnaping attempts of members of the international community. They made the decision to close the embassy down and get everybody out. When we told everybody that the decision now was that we would all depart, we had to totally change our plans.

First we notified the Marines in the embassy to begin destroying classified documents. Because the embassy had been the backdrop of much of the fighting for the Government House two blocks away, ninety windows in the chancery had been blown out. The Marines had to crawl through the glass on the floor in the dark to get to the areas where we had classified materials. Some of our safes were old and temperamental. The Marines had a big challenge getting some of the safes open so they could destroy the classified materials. They kept us updated on their progress and we knew they didn't have enough time to destroy everything that should have been. We gave them priority areas and then told them to do what they could by six am and then prepare to be picked up from the chancery.

Back at the residential areas, our personnel were going through traumatic times. It's one thing if you know that you're going to have some of your American colleagues staying behind and keeping watch over your possessions and your animals, but when the decision is that everybody is leaving and you're closing the embassy down, that is really, really traumatic. It provided a fascinating glimpse into human psychology and how different personalities accept such traumatic events.

We had some people that handled it very well and others who didn't cope well. They became fixated on certain things, some of which were so strange, but others that were kind of predictable about animals. If you're leaving your pets behind, you immediately wonder who's going to take care of them. You wonder if somebody going to kill them and eat them. Trying to calm people down and to organize how to keep all of the animals cared for and alive was a challenge since we would be leaving in six hours. We decided to get each family's household local staff and have them come in to look after the animals. We had each family get their dog food or cat food out. We consolidated it so that the Sierra Leonean staff would know where all the pet food was. For so many people keeping the pets alive was their main focus.

Q: Where was the mercenary force? Had they disappeared?

WRIGHT: Some of the Executive Outcomes staff had flown the president out to Guinea in Guinea with one of the helicopters. They did not have the resources to really mount a major counterattack in Freetown. Some of their people had been trapped in outlying areas. They were fighting for their own survival.

Q: How did the evacuation work?

WRIGHT: We were later told the evacuation ended up being the largest evacuation since Vietnam. It was a three-day operation. Voice of America and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) had been announcing to that any American citizen that wanted to be evacuated needed to meet at the Mammy Yoko Hotel on Friday morning and to bring their passports and identification documents. Well, of course when any announcement like that goes out, a lot of people decide if the Americans are evacuating, then we had better get out too. When the announcements were being made we didn't realize that we would be closing the embassy. We were saying that we would evacuate American citizens that wanted to leave the country and that the Embassy was evacuating its non-emergency personnel.

On Friday morning at 6:00 AM when we started the evacuation there were about five thousand people that had shown up at the Mammy Yoko Hotel. Many Sierra Leonean wanted to get out of Freetown and other West Africans who had been living in Sierra Leone who had no base of support when the rebels took over. We also started getting requests from other nationalities, Western European and Middle Eastern embassy groups, saying that they would like their nationals to be evacuated. We kept relaying this information back to Washington and Washington would also inform us that, "We've been contacted by [so-and-so] embassy here in Washington and they want their personnel brought out."

At that point it was to be a one-day evacuation, so I said to Washington, "Give me a little guidance on this. Who does Washington want to be pulled out first? Is there a priority list?" I knew that American citizens would be the first on the list, but how do you decide who comes next, particularly when the captain of the USS Kersarge was saying that the maximum evacuees that the ship could hold was 700. How do you determine what to do? Washington, "It's your choice. Go ahead and make decisions." [laughs]

On Thursday about twelve hours before the ship got off the coast of Sierra Leone, a Marine advance team helicoptered in to start working directly with us. We had been in telephone radio contact with the ship as it was steaming up from the Congo. I, as the Charge d'Affaires, and our security officer Jeff Breed were coordinating with the Marine force to give them the lay of the land, the political dynamics, and the security dynamics. We gave them our plan for handling the processing of evacuees, making up manifests, lists of names, nationalities and passport numbers. We described the area we had determined would be the best evacuation site, which was the helicopter pads that were next to the Mammy Yoko Hotel. These areas were identified on our established Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) plan. But it turned out later to be a combatant evacuation.

On Friday, the Marines in their helicopters landed and started a process that ultimately ended up with us taking out 900 people by the end of the day. As we kept going through the crowds and pulling out American citizens and citizens of other nationalities whose countries had requested that we take them out, there were more and more and more people being identified that didn't have any type of support base in Sierra Leone. There were thirty Italian tourists that happened to be in Freetown and lots of others that really needed to get out of unpredictable and dangerous Freetown. We went through the crowds endless times to pull out American citizens others were had identified were to go. Finally about four o'clock I was satisfied we had gotten all the people that had been identified to us that needed to go. So off we went. I was on the last helicopter out of the Mammy Yoko Hotel. We knew that there were some Americans that were still in Freetown, but they said they did not want to be evacuated. They were willing to take their chances with whatever developed. I knew that and I told Washington there still are some Americans in Freetown but they didn't want to go.

We got everybody on board the Kersarge and continuing to process evacuees. Our initial processing method at the Mammy Yoko hotel did not work fast enough. There were too many people that needed to get out and it was taking too long to fully process them on land before we put them on helicopters to the ship. The Marines said, "We can't stay here all day. We need to get this thing moving faster. You must expedite your processing. The paperwork is taking way too much time." A State Department regional consular "fly away team" had been flown to the ship while the ship was on its way up from the Congo. We then moved the processing operation on board the ship rather than at the hotel, which really speeded it up. By four o'clock, we had processed everyone we thought we were going to evacuate.

When Washington told us that we would be evacuated by military ship, we said, "Where are we going to be evacuated to? Where are you taking us on this ship? To Senegal? To Dakar? Or down to the Ivory Coast? You know, someplace where they've got enough hotels, big enough airports to get people moving fast. The response back from Washington was: "No, we're taking you to Conakry, Guinea." We said, "Guinea, the country next door to Sierra Leone. Conakry, Guinea?" For those of us who had been to Conakry, we'd just as soon stay in Freetown with the fighting going on. We don't want to go to Conakry. There's nothing in Conakry. It's a decrepit old town that has a small number of hotels. Nobody wants to go to Guinea. Take us someplace else, please. "Nope, you're going to Conakry." Well, as it turned out, with the numbers of people that we brought out 900 people that totally overloaded Conakry. We were in touch with Washington during evacuation day saying, "The numbers of people that we're now putting on board this ship, you're going to have to find lots of hotels."

Q: This was the second and third days too?

WRIGHT: No, this was still the first day. Nine hundred people on the first day. We were calling Washington and saying, "You have got to get some charter aircraft into Conakry because there is not enough hotel space in the city." Of course our embassy in Conakry was saying the same thing: "What do you mean you're bringing in 900 people here? There's no space for that number."

Then as we were steaming to Conakry in the evening Washington called back to say, "You forgot some Americans." I said, "I know there are some Americans that didn't want to go out on this evacuation, but we didn't leave any American behind that was at the evacuation site. Any American who wanted to leave, we got. I know because I personally went out in that crowd of five thousand people and looked at every passport. Our staff had thoroughly canvassed the crowd. There was an American embassy eye that looked at every passport. Washington said, "We've now been notified that there were some Americans that got to the evacuation site after you left." I said, "That's a different story. If they hadn't arrived in the course of this whole day and with three days notice on the radio, what do you want us to do?" And they said, "Well, it turns out that we've gotten an inquiry from the White House about this because the nanny for Vice President Gore's kids is Sierra Leonean. The nanny's kids are visiting their grandmother in Freetown. The three kids did not get to the evacuation site. We said, "Well, that's a problem for sure but does that mean that you want us to go back and get three kids? Are they American citizens? [Are they this?] [Are they that?]" Well, of course those were not the right questions to ask. And then Washington said, "And you forgot the orphans." I said, "The orphans?" There's an American missionary ran an orphanage. We had lots of contact with her at the embassy because she was trying to get Sierra Leonean orphans adopted by Americans. (end of tape)

She brought twenty orphans to the evacuation site. We told her, "These are Sierra Leonean kids, they're not American kids. While we certainly sympathize with the plight of the orphans, they're better off staying here. You don't have legal authority to take them out of the country. They don't have passports. There's no documentation on them. Even if you had a Sierra Leonean court order giving you custody of them, you don't know where you are taking them." Our greatest concern was that there was no legal document to say these kids could leave the country. The American was not the legal guardian of them. She ran an orphanage but she wasn't their legal guardian. She got on the phone to some of her U.S. congressional friends and great pressure was put on the State Department by certain congresspersons that these kids ought to be taken out of Sierra Leone. So the instructions back from Washington were that you go back and go back right now and pick up the Americans left behind in the Sierra Leonean that belonged to the nanny's family and the orphans.

By that time it was later in the evening. We've got nine hundred people on board that we're trying to get into Conakry. I met with the captain of the ship and the Marine commander and we had a discussed what was possible at this hour. We had helicopter pilots that had been flying all day. We had crew receiving folks on board. The ship was maxed out on toilet facilities. We needed to get people off the ship. The sailors on board had already given up their bunks because we knew that we weren't going to be able to fly all of the evacuees off and get them into Conakry tonight. Some were going to have to stay overnight on the ship. So both the Marine commander and the captain of the ship said, "It is physically impossible for us to go back to Freetown tonight." They said, "If people are under siege and it is truly a matter of life and death, then we will reevaluate a decision." But they said, "Right now things are as quiet as they have been in the last few days in Freetown and we recommend that we don't go back tonight." They said, "As soon as we get these nine hundred flown off the ship into Conakry, we can turn back around and we'll be off Freetown in the morning. We can pick up the remainder first thing in the morning."

So we called back to Washington and said, "Our decision is that because there is no imminent danger, because everyone is very tired from today's big evacuation and the safety considerations for the people that have to do these evacuations, we've decided that we want to evacuate the remaining people first thing in the morning." Well, the folks in Washington didn't like that answer but we just stuck to our guns. We said, "We are here, we see what's going on and we are not going to go back in there. But we'll be there first thing in the morning. What you all in Washington can do for us is to make sure that all of those people that you want to have taken out are down at the hotel first thing in the morning. We'll start coming in there at daybreak and we'll take out everybody that you want us to." So that's what happened.

We continued during the night to offload people by helicopter in Guinea. Our little embassy in Conakry was overwhelmed. Ambassador Tibor Nagy and his team did a terrific job. The whole mission mobilized to get hotel rooms for our embassy staff that would be staying a few days until Washington made the decision on what we should do. Charter planes started coming in to Conakry to take people out. It was a very tough on our embassy staff but they got the job done.

The next morning at daybreak we were offshore in Sierra Leone. We went ashore again and not only did we have the eighteen orphans, by that time a couple of other Americans had shown up who had arrived from upcountry- from outside of the Freetown area. They had seen enough of the RUF atrocities and wanted to be evacuated. Other nationalities had started arriving, too, from different towns. They had come through the rebel lines and gotten down there. And then there were various government officials who started appearing in disguise at the hotel with terrible tales of what was happening to them. I knew what would happen to them if the RUF got them, so I decided we'd evacuate them for their own safety. We evacuated three hundred people that morning including all the kids of Vice President Gore's nanny.

So off we went back to Guinea with our new load of three hundred people and some of the earlier 900 that we had not been able to get to Conakry before turning the ship around. In the meantime there were still thousands of Sierra Leonean and other West Africans that were at the hotel saying, "We need to get out of here. Things are really getting worse and worse in Freetown. We are afraid the rebels are going to come down into this area and just wipe us all out." The rebels were noted for really brutal, brutal activities chopping people's arms and legs off.

On Saturday, the second day of the evacuation, the ship never actually got to Conakry. We got close enough to start ferrying people off and by that time I had sent all of our embassy staff ashore and help the embassy in Conakry with all of the processing there. I had stayed on board and Ambassador Hirsch arrived back from his R&R. He was just aghast that this terrible thing had happened while he was away from his post. He was so distraught that he hadn't been there to lead his mission, as anyone who's in that leadership position would feel. He had flown back from his R&R and had gotten to Guinea and came on board the ship to thank the ship's crew for all their help.

While he was on board and the rest of our embassy were in Conakry, we got information from Sierra Leone that the rebel forces were attacking the Mammy Yoko hotel. There were still some Americans, including the manager of the hotel who had still decided not to leave. There were diplomatic missions that had decided not to leave. The British High Commission had decided that it would not close but would send out its non-essential people. The British high commissioner, military attaché and military training assistance officer were still in Freetown. All of a sudden the RUF started firing on the hotel. A helicopter gunship of the Sierra Leonean military stood off the hotel and started firing rockets into the hotel. Rebels fired mortars into the hotel. The hotel was on fire. Eight hundred people had gathered in the basement of the hotel to try to get away from all this firing. The British military attaché and British military training team were at the hotel and were trying to mount a defense against this rebel attack. The remaining part of the Nigerian military training team was there, a small unit of about fifty people.

The American hotel manager called the State Department. The operations center patched him through to us on the ship so that he could describe what was going on. He said, "We've got eight hundred people in the basement of the hotel. We've got people that are wounded; we've got Nigerian soldiers that have been killed and their bodies have been brought down here. It's horribly hot. We have no water. Things are really, really bad and they're going to get worse. Please come back and help us." With the descriptions he was giving to us, Marine operations personnel started figuring out what they could do to come back in to help defend that hotel and prevent a huge loss of life. Because the defense would definitely require combat operations to have control of the perimeter of the hotel, the plans had to be cleared through the Pentagon. The first step though was to get authorization to turn the ship back around and start steaming back to Sierra Leone while all the plans were being finalized. The next step would be for Washington to approve a combat operation to go into the hotel area, bringing not just Marines with handheld weapons but to bring in armored personnel carriers and other combat equipment. On the first two days the Marines had brought in shooters that protected the perimeter of the hotel while helicopters were coming in to pull people out. But this time we needed to push the rebels back and have such a large presence that the rebels would not continue to fire on the hotel. That would allow us to get the people out of the hotel and get them to safety.

With all of this going on at the hotel, the remaining diplomatic missions who before had said, "We've seen coups before in West Africa, we've seen violence, it's not a problem. You Americans are being chickens about this whole thing in closing your embassy. In fact, by your closing it you're making it worse. Your actions mean that more people will want to leave rather than stay and try to sort this out here." And I believe there is some truth to those observations. In fact, those were the words I had used with Washington in my attempt to have a small stay behind presence at our Embassy.

When the rebels started hitting the hotel hard, everyone decided it was time to get out. So we steamed back toward Freetown. Planning continued through the night with how the Marines and our U.S. Army Special Forces team that was still on board were going approach this mission. All this time we were in contact with the hotel. Remarkably the hotel manager had been able to drop a telephone line from his office on the first floor down to the basement. The dropline held and we were able to keep in touch with him all through the night. He vividly described the noise of the weapons, heat in the basement the people that were wounded, the people that had died, those passing out from the heat and the lack of water and lack of food it was just heart-rending to hear what they were going through.

By three in the morning we had gotten approval for the plans to go back and take the hotel. By five o'clock, truly at the crack of dawn, Marines and Army personnel were getting into hovercraft, into helicopters and into harrier jets that were providing an "airborne cap" over Freetown. It was like out of the movies! When you got into that helicopter and as the sun was rising, you saw all hovercraft leaving the back of the ship and the big rooster tails of water coming up. The hovercraft were carrying armored personnel carriers and lots of firepower with them. Seeing the hovercraft hit the beach and Marines emerging from the armored personnel carriers and creating a concertina barrier that would provide safety on the beach. This time we weren't landing on the helicopter pads inside the hotel complex, we were landing on the road that was outside the complex. The road was next to the beach in an area they secured with the concertina wire. This would provide an area where we could identify anyone coming up to that area. If the person wasn't identified to our satisfaction then they were in big trouble.

Anyway, we told the people that would be coming out of the hotel and hopefully the rebels were not going to be shooting directly at them to come down onto the beach and turn left on the beach and come down toward the helicopters. Since I had sent all of our embassy staff onshore in Guinea, Ambassador Hirsch and I were the only ones left from the embassy onboard that ship. The captain of the ship had said that he didn't want to send more helicopters into Guinea to pick up more of our embassy staff; he just wanted to turn the ship around and head straight for Sierra Leone. So it ended up that I was the only State Department person there to identify passports and to make the decision on whom would be evacuated. The numbers of people we knew were in great, great danger were astronomical. Trying to sort out which of those should be evacuated, the prioritization of that whole thing was just a nightmare. By the time it was all over though, and the Navy relaxed a lot of its regulations on that particular day because they had seen what was going on. He pulled out the stops to let us have the opportunity to evacuate as many people as we felt appropriate. They no longer required that every passenger had to have a life vest and helmet when you boarded the helicopters. Previously passengers had to have this gear on and only fifty people could get on board the helicopter. It took time to stage all that. Well, this time there were no helmets and no life vest. It was getting them on and gets them seated and even seating them on the floor the helicopter. And this time no one could take any luggage at all. Before, everyone could take one small suitcase with them; this time they said, "Nobody takes anything."

So you had people that were jettisoning suitcases because we couldn't get people out if everybody took one suitcase. So they were desperately rummaging through their suitcases to get their identity documents and the possessions that you really need to have when you're being evacuated. It was stressful enough just trying to cram stuff into one small little suitcase when you had a few minutes at home, but there on the beach when the word was, "You can't take that Samsonite luggage," all these poor people were going, "Oh, my god," and they'd strip down and get all this stuff and try to put it in a little bag and their suitcase would just be left there. Then when other embassies' officers were coming to the beach for this marathon evacuation, they ended up just leaving their cars on the beach. God knows whatever happened to the cars and luggage. I think they became rebel-mobiles very quickly after we left. The Egyptian ambassador and his family arrived in a Mercedeand there must've been 30 people in that Mercedel have never seen so many people come out of a car in my life. [laughs] And then of course we were putting on board the Nigerians that had been wounded and a British military officer who had been wounded in the shootout that day. It was a real mess. But by the end of the day we ended up getting 1,400 people out.

Q: Good God.

WRIGHT: "Good God" is right. The captain of the ship was great! Before we went ashore I said, "Give me an idewhat is the maximum that we can put on the ship before we sink this thing?" and he said, "You won't ever sink it but the problem is the support facilities," the toilets, the food and all that stuff. And he said, "1,100 at the most, but just keep in touch with me minute by minute and tell me what you're seeing and what we've got to do and we'll do what we have to." It ended up we brought out 1,400 people in a period of about six hours. And then the poor little embassy in Guinea, and the other embassies in Guinea, who thought that they had seen the worst the world could ever throw at them with the nine hundred the first day and the three hundred the second day, and then all of a sudden we call them to say, "You ain't seen nothing yet." [laughs]

Later, I came in for some criticism by various folks in Washington because I had authorized such a great number of people to be evacuated to Guinea. I've learned since that in other operations whoever had been in charge had been very strict about only Americans being evacuated and they had come in for worldwide criticism for not helping more people in danger. But I felt very comfortable with doing what I felt I needed to do. I wanted to do the right thing, something that one day, or one year or five years later I would be proud of and not having second thoughts. I know taking all those people out was definitely the right thing to do. Bureaucratically it was certainly very complicated later on but we saved a lot of lives doing it.

Q: What happened in Sierra Leone after you all left? Did you find out? What did the rebel forces do?

WRIGHT: Well, the RUF tore up the city pretty badly. They really wrecked havoc on it and the atrocities that they committed on the civilian population in Freetown were horrible. Subsequently hundreds of thousands more left Freetown and went into Guinea and Liberia. There were over a million and a quarter people that were living in Freetown to start with and the population went down to about what they were estimating maybe 800,000. The refugee camps in Liberia and Guinea were huge from that exodus.

One of the most tragic aspects of the evacuation was leaving behind your Foreign Service National (FSN) force. You leave and you've left your good, loyal employees behind. During the first day some of the FSNs asked if they could be evacuated with us. I put that request to Washington and they said the FSNs could not go to the United States, but could be evacuated as far as Guinea. But what they in Guinea, how they survive; they would have to figure out what. Washington's recommendation was that they stay in Sierra Leone. The USG would continue to pay them in Sierra Leone but they should stay in Sierra Leone. We had about twenty-five FSNs who decided that they would go to Guinea with us on the ship. Later on we had another twenty-five that made their own way out to Conakry. We had to fight hard to keep them on the payroll in Guinea. We ended up having these employees work with the embassy in Conakry. For those that stayed behind in Freetown, trying to figure out a mechanism to get them paid, of actually getting money in their hands, was really, really complicated.

We ended up using Lebanese merchants who stayed in Freetown. They somehow ride out all the emergencies. They've got their connections with everybody. So we would transfer money to a Lebanese bank account in London and then the Lebanese merchant in Sierra Leone would provide Sierra Leonean money to our embassy staff. For the ten months we were out of Sierra Leone, our staff was paid. They were so loyal and it wasn't just because of the money. They were loyal, good people who all of our compounds. They were never looted any possession. During the time they packed up fifteen families' household goods. Unbeknownst to the rebels as to what was going on, they packed up all the families' possessions, crated them up, and at a certain point, about six months afterwards they called us in Washington and said, "We think we have figured out a way that we can get all the household goods out of Sierra Leone. We think we can broker some deals with rebels on the highway all the way to Guinea. If you will authorize us to try it, we'll get it done. And we'll drive out all the four-wheel drive vehicles and we'll take all the pets out to Guinea." Of the seven pets that had been left behind, only one of them had unfortunately died. But six pets would be coming out on this convoy.

By this time our American embassy staff had been broken up and sent on other assignments. We had made the assessment two months after leaving Sierra Leone that there was no way that we were going to be going back into Sierra Leone quickly. Ambassador Hirsch and I thought our staff should get other assignments and get on with their lives. We contacted our former staff members who were then all over the world to say, "The FSNs think they can get our household goods out of Sierra Leone. Do you want to authorize them to try it? If you don't want your stuff on the convoy we'll leave it packed up in the residence. But this is your one opportunity to get your possession until things settle down in Sierra Leone so that we can reopen the embassy. We just don't know when that'll be." So everybody said, "Yes, let's give it a shot," and so those FSNs, those brave, courageous folks, got some tractor trailer trucks and moved our household goods. Thirty-eight checkpoints they had to go through in Sierra Leone and in Guinea, paying off the rebels at the checkpoints all the way along. They got everything into Guinea without incident. From all of the reports we got back from our folks, 99.9 percent of the stuff was there. There was virtually nothing missing and virtually no damage other than one crate that apparently got water in it somewhere. But it was just a remarkable, remarkable performance by our FSNs.

Q: You were just saying that what happened was eventually the Nigerians did what?

WRIGHT: A West African security force called ECOMOG was formed of primarily Nigerian army personnel. They came back into Sierra Leone and beat back the rebels in March and April of 1998. In May of '98 Ambassador Hirsch and I reopened the embassy and started bringing in personnel. I left for a new assignment in August of '98. The embassy then closed again in December of '98 because of more trouble with rebels coming back into Freetown. It's been closed two other times since.

Q: Then what happened to you?

WRIGHT: Then I went on to another assignment as the deputy chief of mission in Micronesia, the Federated States of Micronesia. I was the charge there for a little over a year until we finally got a political appointee ambassador. The interesting part of that assignment was tracking down all the U.S. federal programs that we have there through a compact of association that the U.S. government signed with Micronesia in 1987. In 1987 the FSM left behind fifty years as a UN trust territory with the U.S. as the trustee and became an independent country. The U.S. wanted defense rights for the huge area of the Pacific Ocean that Micronesia has and we were willing to pay, over a fifteen-year period, \$1.5 billion for those rights. Per capita it is the fourth largest aid program that the United States government has. But it's not called an aid program; it's a compact payment program. The Compact provided Micronesians with access to over 100 U.S. federal programs in health, education and housing. You name it and they were eligible for it. Unfortunately nobody had really been watching what was going on with the programs and there was a huge amount of graft and corruption in them. So for two years I helped sort out the graft and corruption, to the extent that I was almost declared persona non grata from a country that has the strongest voting record with the United States that there is; but because of the dirt that we uncovered on some of the key leaders of that country, I almost got thrown out of the country.

Q: We're under time constraints but I think maybe we ought to keep moving. By 2000 whither?

WRIGHT: After my assignment in Micronesia, in 2000 I went to Hawaii on a Pearson program working in the office of the governor of the state of Hawaii, primarily to help on the annual meeting for the Asian Development Bank (ADB). I was supposed to be going to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York but that assignment fell through at the very last minute, so in May of 2000 I was searching around frantically for someplace to go and the Hawaii thing popped up. Hawaii was hosting that meeting on short notice after Seattle, following its terrible experience with the violent WTO (World Trade Organization) meeting bailed out on hosting the ADB meeting. Hawaii volunteered, but needed some help on federal liaison. So they were very willing to have somebody from the State Department come to help them out. Although it's definitely not a career enhancing move to take the Pearson opportunities, it turned out to be very interesting and it provided me a chance to make connections with a lot of other Pacific institutions that are headquartered in Hawaii.

While I was in Hawaii September 11 happened and then the U.S. went into Afghanistan began.

Q: We're talking about September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Center in New York was destroyed by al-Qaeda group operating out of Afghanistan.

WRIGHT: Yes, and then when the decision was made that one of our responses to September 11 would be to go into Afghanistan and take out al-Qaeda and the Taliban, I was sitting in Hawaii as frustrated as everyone else who wasn't hands-on with the U.S. government responses. When it became apparent that military operations were being successful and al-Qaeda were on the run and the Taliban were moving out, there was the conference in Bonn, Germany where various Afghan groups came together and agreed that they would form an interim administration. With that decision it was obvious that a U.S. embassy would be reestablished pretty quickly. So I decided it was time for me to fly to Washington to lobby to see if I couldn't be a part of the reopening of that embassy. I had closed and opened embassies and had been in military operations both as a military officer and in the Foreign Service, being involved in Somalia and Sierra Leone and previously in Grenada with the military. I had the experience that I hoped Washington would value and let me go.

So I walked the halls of the State Department putting out my CV and hyping my background up, to no avail. I was told by the South Asian group, "Thank you very much. We've got people who have been in this area." I said, "Well, I have at least been in Afghanistan because thirty years ago as a hippie I traveled through Afghanistan on the back of a truck. At least I've seen the land." "Well, but you haven't been working the issues," and "Thank you very much. We'll get in touch if we need any help." I went back through one last day pleading, "Don't forget me. I really want to do this. I'm in Hawaii. I'm not doing anything that's important and I want to help. Let me help."

In fact I went so far as to go to the European bureau to say, "I know the Central Asian countries are all helping out on this. I'll be glad to go to one of those countries to help our embassies there." Quickly I was identified to go to Turkmenistan to help. When I got back to Hawaii I was making plans to go to Turkmenistan when the South Asian bureau called. They said, "We're rethinking and you may be higher up in the pecking order than we thought. We just wanted to let you know. Could you be prepared in a couple of weeks to go to Afghanistan if we need you?" I said, "Yes, I sure can. That would be great." About two days later they called back and said, "We've done some more evaluation. Could you be ready tomorrow morning?" [laughs] "We'll have a ticket at the airport and you're to go to London, pick up a visa to Pakistan in London, and be in Islamabad in two nights hence. The plane taking in our first team is departing for Afghanistan night and we want you on that plane." I said, "Fine. Great. What's my job going to be?" "Well, you're going to be the political officer. We're sending in a communicator, an admin officer, a political officer, a security officer, and a public affairs officer and that's going to be our first team." I thought, well, that's good. I wonder what happened to all these other people that really know the area and have been working the issues. [laughs] So I started reading more books on Afghanistan really fast and getting familiar with all the Afghan names I would need to know.

I packed my bags, locked up my condo in Honolulu and walked out. And what a fascinating experience that was to be flying into Pakistan, go into that beleaguered embassy with so many people working out of it, and then to be taken out to the airport and put into the back of a C-130. When we were on the tarmac ready to board the plane, the aircraft crew said, "You'd better get your heavy coats out of your suitcases because it's fifteen degrees and snowing at Bagram Air Base." Thank goodness I'd been able to shop in London. I'd bought a heavy coat and some heavy pants because I didn't have any in Honolulu. In my quick shopping trip in Honolulu before I left, there was nothing to buy for winter weather.

When the plane landed at Bagram Air Base, the back end of the plane came open and some guys with blue lights on their helmets came on board. It was perfectly black, no lights anywhere. It turned out that the Air Force was doing all operations at night with no light so that there would not be visible targets. As a result everybody was wearing night vision devices, except us. The State Department doesn't give us night vision devices. Everybody else could see what they were doing but we were stumbling along. This big voice says, "You had better follow right in my footsteps because there are land mines everywhere. If you step off this path, you're going to be dead." We all walked like little ducks right behind the blue light. [laughs]

We walked out to a car on the side of the runway, got in and stayed in that car until dawn. Then we started on the drive into Kabul two hours from Bagram into Kabul. We got to the embassy about seven in the morning. Oh, what a pitiful old building that was. It had been twelve years since we had occupied the building. Windows had been blown out and rockets had landed on the top of it from the fighting between the mujahideen, not the fighting with the Taliban. We were met by our staff of the embassy that had been on the payroll for twelve years. Sixty local staff members were there to provide a presence primarily to keep out common looters. Most were guards and gardeners and a few did minor maintenance on our twelve-year old cars.

And then we embarked on the great adventure of reestablishing our diplomatic presence. We barely beat Hamid Karzai and the interim administration's arrival. We were there about three days before they got in. We drove around Kabul initially in our small twelve year old Volkswagen Passats. We were not the first persons into the U.S. embassy building. We had been preceded by a Marine force of a hundred Marines who secured the area to make sure that there were no booby traps or grenades on the grounds to harm anyone. They were there to protect the embassy and were in the process of building a fortress out of it, which we certainly needed. The probability of a direct attack on the embassy is still very great, in my opinion. In those early days we were anticipating that elements of al-Qaeda would take a direct shot at that American flag that was riding high above the embassy. With low walls around the compound, it was, and still is, a vulnerable place. I think we are really lucky that there has been no major attack on the embassy. We were also preceded by a small team from the South Asia Executive Office who made a quick assessment of what was needed to get the building into operating condition. They made their assessment and zipped back to Washington to get funding for the renovations.

With the arrival of the interim administration, we began endless rounds of talks with members of the administration. Endless groups of people from Washington began arriving. Our first guest was Ambassador Jim Dobbins, who was the special envoy to the Northern Alliance. He then became the first special envoy to work directly with the administration in Kabul. He stayed long in Kabul though. He said he would never take a shower in Kabul; he would not stay long enough that he needed to take a shower. So he would stay a day and a half and leave and then stay out for a week or so and then come back in for a day.

We only had one flush toilet and one shower for 110 people. The Marines were digging outside latrines and most were taking showers out of buckets. We were trying to find food for everyone. We certainly had plenty of MREs, or Meals Ready to Eat, but those got old fast. We asked our local staff, "What are you guys eating at home? What's the food situation here?" They answered, "Fine. We've got food, lamb, chicken, vegetables..." "Well, by chance do any of you have friends or relatives that cook? Industrial size cooking?" One of the mechanics said, "My brother's restaurant is open." We asked, "Oh, it is? Well, how about if he'll bring some tasty dishes so we can try them?" After tasting the food and going to the restaurant and cautioning the owner strongly, "We think there is a great probability that Al-Qaeda or Taliban supporters might try to poison us if they know that we're getting food from your place. Can you keep quiet about providing food to us?" We had concerns about having our food brought in on one level, but we felt comfortable with the brother of one of our most trusted local employees. So from then on our lunch meal arrived in the backend of one of the twelve-year-old Passats. The meal was served on plates we had bought at the market. We had very few sicknesses and everyone ate well although most lost weight while in Kabul.

Q: Afghan food is great.

WRIGHT: It's wonderful.

Q: They have Afghan restaurants here in Washington. It's really first-class cuisine.

WRIGHT: Yes, and Hamid Karzai's brother has an Afghan restaurant in Baltimore. The food situation improved dramatically. In the morning we would have the nan, flatbread that was carried in by one of the mechanics we designated as our local chef. We had pulled out a stove and a refrigerator from the USIS (United States Information Service) warehouse where we had probably fifty electric stoves and fifty refrigerators that had been in storage for twelve years. We up a little kitchen in hallway of the bunker where we were staying. It was truly a bunker, dug out of the ground. It was built to protect our local staff against rocket attacks during the mujahideen era. We had a women's dormitory five beds for women and five beds in another room for men. Eventually the third room became a dining room with a much watched TV. We had a small bathroom with one toilet and one shower. We kept coffee going twenty-four hours a day, hot water for tea, and flatbread. Finally we got in some jams. One day asked, "How about yogurt? Is there any yogurt available?" and our mechanic, now chef, said, "Oh, I make yogurt." So he started making yogurt in little plastic cups.

For the evening meal, because we had had a large lunch from the Afghan restaurant, and because it was so cold at night, all we wanted was soup. So our cook made a pot of soup for ten. As more and more people started coming in on the civilian side, the pot grew from a little ten-person pot to two giant cauldrons on two stoves to feed sixty people. Virtually everyone liked the meals and felt that they were getting plenty to eat, although we all lost weight while we were there because of the intensity of which we were working. The Marines were taking care of themselves on the food scene although when we had extra soup we always called them and when they had extra meals they would call us. We had an excellent relationship with the Marines.

Q: What was the situation? What were you doing as political officer? In the first place, was there an ambassador?

WRIGHT: No, initially Washington had not designated someone from our small team as Charge d'Affaires. We called back to Washington and said, "Okay, who do you want to kind of be the titular leader of crew?" Fortunately all of us got along very well so we were all saying, "You do it." "Oh, you do it." It didn't matter to us who was the head because we all did our individual jobs so well that it was going to work no matter who it was. Janine Jackson, the administrative officer, was an OC level. Janine was the senior ranking officer and was designated the Charge for the ten days until Ambassador Ryan Crocker, the DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) from NEA, arrived. He was the first official Charge d'Affaires. He stayed for two months and was followed by the first ambassador, Robert Finn, who arrived in late March.

Q: Well, you were there from when to when?

WRIGHT: I was there from December through March. In early April I left.

Q: As political officer what were you doing?

WRIGHT: I was talking to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the various issues that Washington needed to have clarified, setting up appointments for the stream of people coming in from Washington. Jim Dobbins visited several different times as the special envoy. Next General Franks, the commander of CENTCOM (Central Command) arrived. I set up all of the meetings with President Karzai and with Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah. (end of tape)

Many of the Afghans appointed to the interim administration had not lived in Afghanistan for the last twenty years. Many were fearful of the security environment. They were hopeful and fearful. They were hopeful because they knew this was the grand opportunity for Afghanistan to get on its feet, but fearful because they had no base of operations. They had no homes, no cars, and no telephones. They didn't have anything. Most lived in the old ramshackle Intercontinental hotel; intercontinental only in name; no running water, electricity little of the time. It was difficult tracking them down, because there were no telephones. You had to physically go search for people or send runners out to search for them to get appointments or talk to them right then about what we needed to find out. Initially there was a lot of discussion on the economic side of getting the country back on its feet: central bank information, how much money is really in the bank. We talked with Karzai about security, his own personal security, which is still something of great concern to us.

I remember vividly the day that we discovered how poor Karzai's security was. I was coming through the front gate of the embassy compound. An elegant Afghan gentleman was standing at the gate. He held up an American passport so I stopped and said, "Who are you?" He just opened up the car door and hopped right in and I thought, whoa, what's going on here? He said, "I'm an American citizen but I'm Afghan. I'm Hamid Karzai's uncle and I need to talk to you about some problems we've got on security." He said, "This is the only identification I have left. Everything else was stolen from me and I need for you to write some sort of statement that I can use in case this passport gets stolen." I said, "What happened? What got stolen?" and he said, "Hamid and I were at the mosque yesterday," on Friday, "and a big crowd was around us. Both Hamid and I both were pick-pocketed. Everything that we had was gone. Then we got outside the mosque, somebody had taken our shoes and so we had to walk back to the palace barefooted." I said, "What do you mean you had to walk back to the palace? Didn't you have a car?" "No, we just decided we'd walk down the street from the presidential palace to the mosque." I thought, oh god, we've got major security problems.

We called back to Washington saying, "We've got to do something fast on security for Karzai. He's not recognizing the security aspects of his position." Security training for his bodyguards began quickly. We brought some Afghans to the U.S. for personal security training. Quickly, we had some military squads looking after him, but DOD didn't want that responsibility. The State Department didn't want the responsibility either. Initially we were having challenges getting enough diplomatic security officers for the embassy, much less for the President of the country. After the assassination attempt on Karzai, Department of State provided his security, and at the same time continuing to train those Afghans that will ultimately take over his security. He, as an individual, is so important to the future of the political process that we must ensure he is protected.

Q: While you were there you were having to be concerned about his safety.

WRIGHT: Yes, because if he was assassinated the whole thing would potentially fall apart.

Q: I realize this was a chaotic time but was there a feeling that things were coming together?

WRIGHT: Yes, everybody was very hopeful. It's still, in my opinion, a real long shot if this whole thing works, but it's the best opportunity that the Afghans have had for a long time. So many Afghans want this to work and will do everything they can to make it work. That said there are too many warlords with too much power and too many weapons. Unfortunately the U.S. decision that we would not support an expansion of the international security assistance force (ISAF) outside of Kabul is something that is coming back to bite us. From the very beginning our embassy was recommending that the international security force be expanded to other areas of Afghanistan. Washington steadfastly said, "No, we don't want ISAF to be involved outside of Kabul. Although it won't be U.S. troops that would be going out to these outlying areas, we're going to be called upon as the rescue force and we don't want to be obligated to evacuate people or defend people all over the country." The U.S. put roadblocks into virtually every other organization's prognosis that a security force was needed in all the outlying areas. The Brits already have kind of done a unilateral move and they've put some troops up in the Mazar-e Sharif area and that area has calmed down some. Control of the country, not just Kabul, is the key to the ultimate success in Afghanistan. The U.S. is going to have to bite the bullet on having ISAF outside of Kabul at some time.

Q: There's been the charge laid that we went into Afghanistan, we took care of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, more or less, and then we didn't follow through.

WRIGHT: I think to a great extent that's true. We should've had a much more aggressive aid program to help more with health and education. On the security side, we started pulling out forces way too early and did not keep enough forces to consolidate the initial victory. With the number of attacks that the remaining coalition forces are taking, you can see that things aren't over. I wouldn't say that there's a buildup of Al Qaeda or Taliban forces, but there are still plenty of people out there that can cause us trouble.

Q: While you were in Kabul, was the ghost of Mogadishu in your thoughts? Were you thinking, "Are we really going to make it?" All it would have to take is seventeen people killed and we'll pull out. Was this a concern?

WRIGHT: Indeed it was. I was very pleased to see that we have hung in there despite a lot of casualties. The problem, it seems to me, is that we have changed our focus too soon. Even though we still have some troops in Afghanistan, to divert the focus off Afghanistan and start the operations in Iraq, have undercut what should've been done in Afghanistan. We have left Afghanistan in jeopardy. We should've stuck with Afghanistan, gotten that further down the road before ever trying to bite off Iraq.

Q: Did you find any problem going in there as a woman? You know, because the Taliban does horrendous things to women. How did you find that?

WRIGHT: I found there were no problems. I certainly wanted to be sensitive to the traditions of the Afghan people. Women in Afghanistan wore head scarves. For international women, it was important to have a scarf on in a mosque or in the presence of religious leaders. I always carried a scarf around, but I only wore it in situations where I felt it was appropriate. The rest of the time there was no problem at all in attire. Of course you dressed appropriately. Because it was so cold in December, January and February, I generally wore dress slacks. In my dealings with the senior leadership of the interim administration, and with some of the lower level bureaucrats that were still part of the bureaucratic organization through the Taliban years and were held over, I had no trouble at all, no problems at all.

Q: Going back to the time when the South Asia bureau said, "We've got experts," and all of a sudden they decide that they need somebody who thirty years ago had been a hippie in Afghanistan as a political officer, this is supposed to be the person who comes in and really knows who does what to whom in the tribal thing and all. You know, it's a complicated society. Did you find that the South Asian bureau had this happened?

WRIGHT: That's something that I still have not figured out, nor have the people who still maintain to this day to me that they should've been the first ones to go in. The only thing that I can figure out is that it was my military background and my experience in crisis situations in Somalia and Sierra Leone. Having been in combat operation environments and my ability to be a liaison with the U.S. military were the major factors. I think they decided that that my general crisis experience was of more value than the intimate knowledge of Afghan affairs.

Q: I think it's a wise choice but it shows that your selling job up and down the corridors, with your papering of the corridors of the fourth floor, or whatever it was, with your CV did help.

WRIGHT: Well, it's true. I think the State Department is a people organization and if you really want to do something and if you take the time to really push hard, you've got a chance, even though you may be a long shot.

Q: Well, and you had the qualifications. Your qualifications are really unique and also they weren't? I mean the Somali thing and the Sierra Leone thing. By the way, on the Sierra Leone thing, did you get any recognition for all of this?

WRIGHT: Yes, I did. Ambassador Hirsch nominated me for the heroism award which I received, as did our RSO (Regional Security Officer) who did some pretty dramatic things. So I'm infinitely grateful to the ambassador for his recognition and for the Department for theirs. We both received our awards from Madeleine Albright in a very nice ceremony. So that was a nice touch.

Q: When you left Kabul, it was a short time but I guess this was a period of intense activity, wasn't it?

WRIGHT: Oh, it was. You were just exhausted by the time four months came along. I actually had taken off for one week in the middle of the time. We started giving people time off about every two months to get some rest. But by that time Washington were identifying Farsi and Dari speakers and others that had the true expertise and language ability to work better in the environment.

Q: How did you find the American military? How well prepared did you feel they were for ending up in this very peculiar operation which was put together in quite a hurry because of the events of 9/11?

WRIGHT: The Special Forces were doing some extraordinary things out in the field, working initially with the Northern Alliance and particularly General Dostem. I flew with Zalmay Khalizad, the U.S. presidential special envoy for Afghanistan, to Mazar-i-Sharif and met with the warlords Dostem and Mohammad Atta and some of the other northern warlords. There we met some special operations officers, who regaled us of tales of riding horses out through the Afghan mountains. They did a remarkable special operations job. As we moved into the consolidation period, the military brought in civil affairs units that had soldiers with Middle Eastern expertise. They did a fine job.

We don't seem to focus on too much is the role of the CIA. The CIA had a huge paramilitary operation. The CIA's role was the most remarkable part of the whole operation. The number of CIA operations people that were there was amazing. There was essentially a CIA army and air force. When our Special Envoy needed to travel to other parts of Afghanistan, we rode on CIA contract planes, rather than U.S. military planes. It was much easier to get aircraft support from the CIA than the military.

Q: Was this called Air-America? [laughs] Like Vietnam.

WRIGHT: Actually they didn't have a name on the aircraft but it was the same type of operation. The CIA had their own pilots, their own planes, their own combat helicopters. To see them in action was impressive. I don't have a clue what the numbers are, but the resources that they brought in to their headquarters in Kabul were impressive. We would go into their warehouse area and drool over the things that had. We were very good friends with the chief of CIA operations and his senior staff. When the book is written about CIA operations in Afghanistan, I think it will be a bestseller.

Q: When did you leave?

WRIGHT: In early April of 2002.

Q: Well, then what?

WRIGHT: Before I went to Afghanistan I had been selected as the DCM of our embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, one of the places left in the world that I've always wanted to go in my quest for isolated, faraway parts of the world. As I left for Afghanistan I got a call from the ambassador in Mongolia who said, "Ann, I hear you're going to Afghanistan. Please don't bail out on me and stay in Afghanistan." It was a real temptation because Afghanistan was so interesting and had all the challenges that I've been trained to do. It was hard not to say that I wanted a one-year assignment to Afghanistan, but I had made the commitment to go to Mongolia and I did want to see Mongolia. So I went ahead and headed on to Mongolia and got there in July of 2002.

Q: And then we come sort of to the end of this particular phase here. What happened? In the first place, let's talk a little bit about Mongolia. What was it like and what were you doing?

WRIGHT: Well, it truly is one of the ends of the earth. It is the most nomadic society, I think, left in the world. Of the two million people that live there, one million live in the capital city and the rest of them live out in gers or yurttelt tents. They herd millions of sheep, horses, camels and yaks. It's just the stuff that true adventure is made of: endless spaces, steppes, the Gobi Desert, the tundra coming down from Siberia, such a diversity of topographic areas. In a country that's as big as half of Western Europe there are five hundred miles of paved road. The rest of the time you're just out flying around in a four-wheel drive vehicle driving wherever you want to go. Just make your own track and go. It's wonderful.

From the west, on the Kazakh border, where you have eagle hunterguys that are riding horses carrying around forty-pound eagles on their arms. The eagles fly off the hunters' arms to catch game-foxes, wolves, rabbits. Huge herds of gazelles are in the eastern steppe and dinosaur fossils are in the Gobi Desert in the south. It's just a marvelous country. Having come out of seventy years of Soviet rule fifteen years ago, in the last three years the Mongolians have started moving ahead. While they have the common problems that all of the fifteen former Soviet satellites states have, they're starting to move ahead in addressing the issues of corruption that they'll have to do to really have to step onto the world stage.

Q: Have the Soviets made much investment there? Because I think of Kyrgyzstan where the Soviets really put more money into Kyrgyzstan than they've gotten out of it. But I was wondering about Mongolia.

WRIGHT: It's the same for Mongolia. Virtually every big building that's there?there would be no buildings there, I don't think, if the Russians hadn't been in there. [laughs] They destroyed the traditional life of Mongolia as a Buddhist society. The Soviets destroyed the Buddhist framework, similar to what the Chinese have done in Tibet. They then build Soviet style buildings in every Soviet republic. Downtown Ulaanbaatar looks just like downtown Bishkek. There's the same central square, the same government buildings, the same opera, the same philharmonic. But if it had not been for the Soviets, neither the educational or health systems in Mongolia would have been as developed as they are. The infrastructure has been deteriorating in the ten years the Soviets left and there's been nothing to take its place. The international community is trying in its own way to help. We there has been a lessening of services to the people since the Soviets left. On the other side, the private sector is growing. So there's hope for that place.

Q: How did you find dealing with the government?

WRIGHT: The current government is remnants of the Communist Party. They were the last government in power when the Soviets were there. There was a democratic movement that was elected for four years and they messed up worse than the former Communists. So the former Communists were reelected. Now they've changed the name of the party and say they've changed their way of doing things, and to an extent I think they have. But still they do have a lot of the old Soviet tendencies. They are an interesting group to work with. The prime minister is a very well educated person who has his hands full. The opposition groups need to come together and mount a good campaign to open up the election process.

Q: Okay, well we've come through to the end game. Could you explain your resignation from the Foreign Service? What inspired this, because in a way you have been so involved in affairs I wouldn't think you'd have time to be introspective or anything else.

WRIGHT: It is kind of an odd thing. Over the years I had been working along in some very controversial programs with the State Department and with the military. I had been involved in a lot of conflictive situations. While I was in Mongolia I read and observed the rapidly growing U.S. focus on Iraq. I remembered sitting in Kabul on the night of the State of the Union address in January 2002. When President Bush said the phrase "axis of evil - Iraq, Iran, and North Korea," those of us sitting there in Kabul, our backs stiffened, and you could hear a pin drop. Everybody was amazed. That was not what we wanted to hear sitting at ground zero in Kabul at the U.S. embassy. When you're talking about an axis of evil; you know, the blatant, the harshness of right in your face sort of statements just kind of grabbed me. We had barely gotten into Afghanistan and the focus already was moving from Afghanistan. The strong rhetoric against Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction was starting up.

When I went to Mongolia I didn't realize that we had already started moving troops into the Middle East. I lost the thread on where the congressional debate was about potential military actions in the region. I think it was just before Christmas when I read an article that said we already had like 130,000 U.S. military troops in the Middle East. I thought, "What in the world are we doing?" The talk about weapons of mass destruction was certainly a concern but I never had thought it was of imminent concern to the national security of the United States. To me there were much more troublesome areas in the world than Iraq. I thought the lack of Bush administration effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was more dangerous than Iraq. Seeing the Israelis running over the villages January and February and seeing those horrible images of Israel just knocking down entire neighborhoods was incredible. The Palestinians were continuing their suicide bombings and the Israelis were responding by destroying villages. And the U.S. was doing nothing from what I could see to calm the waters.

I also thought the lack of administration effort in North Korea was dangerous. The administration said it needed to do a policy review. Two years passed and no review had been done. The North Koreans were becoming more and more strident in demanding dialogue with the United States. Why don't we at least talk with them? We all knew the regime was despicable, but at least by dialogue we have a chance to influence it.

To me those were the flashpoints and not Iraq. Iraq had continued to terrorize its own population. But they had used weapons of mass destruction; they had not invaded another country. So when the administration was more and more strident in its talk of going to war to eliminate the weapons of mass destruction, I kept hoping that the administration would get a UN security council authorization before undertaking military operations. The danger for the U.S. to do a unilateral operation was so high. The probability of terrorist attacks against the U.S. as a result of unilateral action to me was just so high that I just could not fathom why we would be talking in those terms. I kept hoping that we would continue efforts with the UN security council and that we would be able to present sufficient evidence that military operations were necessary in Iraq to convince me, much less other countries.

It was very hard even Mongolia to present Washington's view to the government of Mongolia to convince them that there was a need for military operations at this time. The need, from all accounts, from virtually everybody except the U.S. and the British, was the need to allow the UN to do more inspections. For the administration not to give more time for the inspections was not appropriate. But when the administration had moved all those troops into the region, and to continue to move more in even though there was no agreement in the Security Council, meant to me that war was on its way. You can't move all those troops in at that time of year and not go ahead and use them. If you back down then the right wing of the Republican Party goes after the administration big time.

Q: Were you picking up the feeling that, granted, you couldn't have been farther away from the corridors of power in Washington, in Ulan Bator that there was a battle in the administration between essentially the State Department and the Pentagon, with the White House sort of siding more with the Pentagon?

WRIGHT: Yes. You could pick up little hints of it but, at that time, there wasn't that much publicity about the split between the two. But in my heart I just couldn't believe that all the friends that I had that were working in the European bureau, or in the NEA (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs) bureau, that they could be, in good conscience, the ones pushing this.

You had to be careful, and still have to be careful, of what you send on the State Department E-mail system. I mean for good reasons. I would send cryptic e-mails to friends to say essentially, "What is going on? What is happening?" you'd get very nondescript e-mails back, and from people that generally are a little more forthcoming.

Q: I'm just trying to get a feel. Obviously this is a State Department thing. Was the feeling that somebody is out there monitoring everything?

WRIGHT: I think that's the way everybody in the State Department feels right now. In fact, after I resigned some of the comments to my resignation that came in as State Department e-mails essentially said, "I will not write more on this system."

Q: Were there other ways of? could your friend go through a private e-mail system and get to you in a private way?

WRIGHT: Yes, like through the Yahoo account. And that's where I got enough of a description that I could tell that there was a lot of angst going on in the Department. The e-mails had nothing specifically outlining exactly what the traumas were in the interagency process, but you could read between the lines. I went back to Washington after my resignation to take the retirement seminar. Even though I had resigned, I was still eligible because I had put in enough years to get a retirement. I went back with great trepidation. Quite honestly, I didn't know what to expect, but I found a big, warm welcome waiting for me and for the fact that I had resigned.

Q: This was a true movement of one on your part, wasn't it? I mean, was there any attempt to sort of get a mass number of people to sign letters of protest or anything like this?

WRIGHT: No, there wasn't that I knew of. I had written various drafts of my resignation letter starting probably in February, particularly after Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations. The type of evidence that the administration had on weapons of mass destruction to me was not convincing at all. That's when I started polishing up my resignation letter. I decided that if what Powell described was all the administration could come up with and it wasn't enough to convince me, then I, in good conscience, could try to convince other governments of administration's correctness. About that time, Brady Kiesling resigned. When his resignation letter came out I looked at my drafts of my letters and thought surely we're not going to go to war. Surely we're going to keep working within the UN system. We're going to keep flowing in troops as military pressure but we're not going to use them. We're going to keep after the UN Security Council and let the inspectors have more time to try to find the weapons of mass destruction. And at the time the administration's rhetoric was truly on weapons of mass destruction; this whole thing about regime change was not what the administration was talking about. If the administration would have allowed more time for the UN inspectors to operate I would not have sent in my letter of resignation then.

I did send in a dissent channel cable that outlined my concerns about what was happening, but I held my letter of resignation hoping that we would continue to work through the Security Council. At a certain point after three months or so I left the inspectors would have found weapons. If Saddam would have again refused inspectors access, then to me that refusal would have been sufficient for going back to the international community and getting a decision that action needed to be taken. I probably would not have had as much heartburn on the military operations, although I still would've thought the use of weapons of mass destruction was not imminent. Going ahead with war right then without the UN Security Council authorization, to me was a very dangerous thing for us to do, for our own national security.

Q: Had there been other aspects of our foreign policy with this new administration not just the Iraq thing which had been a concern?

WRIGHT: Yes, the lack of effort on the Israel-Palestine question, the lack of effort on North Korea, and then the curtailment of civil rights and civil liberties following September 11. The numbers of people that we have kept incarcerated as having possible ties to terrorist groups in the United States, without opportunity for legal counsel to me is very disturbing. The classification of those being held in Guantanamo to me is an outright blatant violation of international law. They are prisoners of war, they are not detainees, and the fig leaf that we are hiding behind is something that will be used against us in the future as we go to other conflicts and other people hold our soldiers. From the military perspective you want to classify people as prisoners of war because it gives them the best protections, and you're on the high moral ground if any of your folks get captured during military operations. The international norm is to call people prisoners of war. But when we, the biggest power on earth, start crumbling these long-held traditions, then we are going on a downward slope that is something that I don't think America is about. It's not my America anyway.

Q: Were you able to engage in any dialogue, was anybody from your ambassador or people saying, "Hang on. Don't do this," or anything? I keep thinking of you out there. You really weren't in a place where you could end up in a debating society.

WRIGHT: [laughs] There was a lot of discussion among many of our officers as we would get in the pitiful little daily press guidance of how to explain what the U.S. policy is. We would look at them and say, "How in the world does this explain what we are doing?" We didn't believe this stuff. How can we possibly use this with the Mongolian government without being embarrassed? Of course, you go ahead with it but we were all just shaking our heads at what was going on. We all were concerned about representing these policies. So there was a lot of discussion. But when I started saying, "I'm starting to feel so strongly about this that I'm drafting up some resignation material," then people said, "Well, you know that's a big step. Are you sure you want to go quite that far? Are you sure you want to give up a career on this one?" As we would keep talking about it, then several said, "You know, I wish I was kind of further along in my career." For me at least I had been long enough in federal service that, although I had to check on this I had to make sure that if I resigned, does that mean I give up my retirement and I still would've done it, but fortunately I could resign and that would trigger an immediate retirement.

Q: How old are you now?

WRIGHT: I'm fifty-six.

Q: Your letter of resignation, did anything officially happen?

WRIGHT: First I did get a response cable to my dissent cable, although it came after I had resigned. It was nothing more really than just a combination of about three days worth of press guidance. It contained nothing that convinced me of any greater credibility of the policies. Following my letter of resignation, Secretary of State Powell himself, or a member of his staff, was kind enough to send a short cable back to me. I thought that was very nice of him, considering how busy he was. Essentially he said he was sorry that I disagreed with policies to the extent that I felt that I had to resign, but he understood the need for it if that's the way I felt. He thanked me for my service in the Foreign Service and in the military. So I thought that was very nice. I found out later in Washington from some officers that had a hand in drafting the Secretary's cable, the first version was written by some staffers who gave perfunctory thanks but good riddance message. Powell himself, apparently edited it to something that was respectful and nice, considering the criticism my letter contained.

From the hour that my resignation letter hit Washington, I started receiving e-mails from people in the Foreign Service. As the letter was e-mailed to people outside the Foreign Service, within two weeks I had over four hundred e-mails. They were so poignant. I started extracting parts of them and put them together in a big document that I've e-mailed back to the secretary of state's office. I thought they would be interested in knowing what the comments were that I had received. I did not receive one single negative e-mail, probably because the people that think I was stupid to resign don't want to waste an e-mail on me. [laughs]

Q: No, I think it represents more than that because I must say in my interviewing on going into Iraq or not into Iraq there's a lot of divided opinion, but as far as this administration goes, the people I've talked to some are political appointees on the Republican side, I haven't found any solid support for the basic policies, which is sort of America can do it alone and in-your-face and all of that.

WRIGHT: Well, it's very disturbing. I can't believe that our country is now being represented by these policies. I just came back from a quick vacation trip to Europe. In Italy peace signs were hanging from lots of windows, in every village that we went into. The numbers of people that are aghast at what the administration had done and what they believe America now stands for are huge.

Q: Have there been any attempts to sort of recruit you as an opponent of the administration or anything like that?

WRIGHT: No. But now no longer in federal service, for the first time in my adult life, I have the opportunity to participate in a political campaign. I intend to work for the Democratic candidate because I don't think America should continue to be what we have become. I will certainly work to try to change things.

Q: Well, I think this is probably as good a place to stop as any and I thank you very much.

WRIGHT: I thank you very much for excellent questions.

Letter of resignation:

US Embassy Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

March 19, 2003

Dear Secretary Powell:

When I last saw you in Kabul in January, 2002 you arrived to officially open the U.S. Embassy that I had helped reestablish in December, 2001 as the first political officer. At that time I could not have imagined that I would be writing a year later to resign from the Foreign Service because of U.S. policies. All my adult life I have been in service to the United States. I have been a diplomat for fifteen years and the Deputy Chief of Mission in our Embassies in Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan (briefly) and Mongolia. I have also had assignments in Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Grenada and Nicaragua. received the State Department's Award for Heroism as Charge d'Affaires during the evacuation of Sierra Leone in 1997. I was 26 years in the U.S. Army/Army Reserves and participated in civil reconstruction projects after military operations in Grenada, Panama and Somalia. I attained the rank of Colonel during my military service.

This is the only time in my many years serving America that I have felt I cannot represent the policies of an Administration of the United States. I disagree with the Administration's policies on Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, North Korea and curtailment of civil liberties in the U.S. itself. I believe the Administration's policies are making the world a more dangerous, not a safer, place. I feel obligated morally and professionally to set out my very deep and firm concerns on these policies and to resign from government service as I cannot defend or implement them.

I hope you will bear with my explanation of why I must resign. After thirty years of service to my country, my decision to resign is a huge step and I want to be clear in my reasons why I must do so.

I disagree with the Administration's policies on Iraq

I wrote this letter five weeks ago and held it hoping that the Administration would not go to war against Iraq at this time without United Nations Security Council agreement. I strongly believe that going to war now will make the world more dangerous, not safer.

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein is a despicable dictator and has done incredible damage to the Iraqi people and others of the region. I totally support the international community's demand that Saddam's regime destroy weapons of mass destruction. However, I believe we should not use U.S. military force without UNSC agreement to ensure compliance. In our press for military action now, we have created deep chasms in the international community and in important international organizations. Our policies have alienated many of our allies and created ill will in much of the world.

Countries of the world supported America's action in Afghanistan as a response to the September 11 Al Qaida attacks on America. Since then, America has lost the incredible sympathy of most of the world because of our policy toward Iraq. Much of the world considers our statements about Iraq as arrogant, untruthful and masking a hidden agenda. Leaders of moderate Moslem/Arab countries warn us about predicable outrage and anger of the youth of their countries if America enters an Arab country with the purpose of attacking Moslems/Arabs, not defending them. Attacking the Saddam regime in Iraq now is very different than expelling the same regime from Kuwait, as we did ten years ago.

I strongly believe the probable response of many Arabs of the region and Moslems of the world if the U.S. enters Iraq without UNSC agreement will result in actions extraordinarily dangerous to America and Americans. Military action now without UNSC agreement is much more dangerous for America and the world than allowing the UN weapons inspections to proceed and subsequently taking UNSC authorized action if warranted.

I firmly believe the probability of Saddam using weapons of mass destruction is low, as he knows that using those weapons will trigger an immediate, strong and justified international response. There will be no question of action against Saddam in that case. I strongly disagree with the use of a "preemptive attack" against Iraq and believe that this preemptive attack policy will be used against us and provide justification for individuals and groups to "preemptively attack" America and American citizens.

The international military build-up is providing pressure on the regime that is resulting in a slow, but steady disclosure of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). We should give the weapons inspectors time to do their job. We should not give extremist Moslems/ Arabs a further cause to hate America, or give moderate Moslems a reason to join the extremists. Additionally, we must reevaluate keeping our military forces in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Their presence on the Islamic "holy soil" of Saudi Arabia will be an anti-American rally cry for Moslems as long as the U.S. military remains and a strong reason, in their opinion, for actions against the U.S. government and American citizens.

Although I strongly believe the time is not yet right for military action in Iraq, as a soldier who has been in several military operations, I hope General Franks, U.S. and coalition forces can accomplish the missions they will be ordered to do without loss of civilian or military life and without destruction of the Iraqi peoples' homes and livelihood.

I strongly urge the Department of State to attempt again to stop the policy that is leading us to military action in Iraq without UNSC agreement. Timing is everything and this is not yet the time for military action.

I disagree with the Administration's lack of effort in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Likewise, I cannot support the lack of effort by the Administration to use its influence to resurrect the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As Palestinian suicide bombers kill Israelis and Israeli military operations kill Palestinians and destroy Palestinian towns and cities, the Administration has done little to end the violence. We must exert our considerable financial influence on the Israelis to stop destroying cities and on the Palestinians to curb its youth suicide bombers. I hope the Administration's long-needed "Roadmap for Peace" will have the human resources and political capital needed to finally make some progress toward peace.

I disagree with the Administration's lack of policy on North Korea

Additionally, I cannot support the Administration's position on North Korea. With weapons, bombs and missiles, the risks that North Korea poses are too great to ignore. I strongly believe the Administration's lack of substantive discussion, dialogue and engagement over the last two years has jeopardized security on the peninsula and the region. The situation with North Korea is dangerous for us to continue to neglect.

I disagree with the Administration's policies on Unnecessary Curtailment of Rights in America

Further, I cannot support the Administration's unnecessary curtailment of civil rights following September 11. The investigation of those suspected of ties with terrorist organizations is critical but the legal system of America for 200 years has been based on standards that provide protections for persons during the investigation period. Solitary confinement without access to legal counsel cuts the heart out of the legal foundation on which our country stands. Additionally, I believe the Administration's secrecy in the judicial process has created an atmosphere of fear to speak out against the gutting of the protections on which America was built and the protections we encourage other countries to provide to their citizens.

Resignation

I have served my country for almost thirty years in the some of the most isolated and dangerous parts of the world. I want to continue to serve America. However, I do not believe in the policies of this Administration and cannot defend or implement them. It is with heavy heart that I must end my service to America and therefore resign due to the Administration's policies.

Mr. Secretary, to end on a personal note, under your leadership, we have made great progress in improving the organization and administration of the Foreign Service and the Department of State. I want to thank you for your extraordinary efforts to that end. I hate to leave the Foreign Service, and I wish you and our colleagues well.

Very Respectfully,

Mary A. Wright, FO-01

End of interview